



Tamarack Time

Left behind when the boys headed west on a bird hunting trip, my old dog has been feeling a little anxious lately. To help her out, and knowing she enjoys a little leaf-peeping, I took her for a slow drive along the quiet roads of the Chippewa National Forest. We both find the fall colors beguiling.

Many of the leaves are down now, but we have come upon tamarack time. Tamarack, or eastern larch, is that remarkable conifer species that drops its needles. But first, along about mid-October, we are treated to a sea of gold in the tamarack bogs.

One of the northernmost trees, the hardy tamarack is reported to survive temperatures as low as -79 degrees F, and live to an age of 335 years. A pioneer or early seral species, tamarack is often the first tree to invade open bogs and burned peatlands. Yet, it is vulnerable to prolonged flooding, and easily damaged by fire.

The most abundant tree in Minnesota at the time of settlement, tamarack has since declined dramatically, particularly on upland sites. A shade-intolerant species, tamarack now is primarily found in the wetlands of Minnesota, where competition with other tree species is less. Wetland drainage for agricultural conversion, logging, fire suppression, and severe outbreaks of the larch sawfly all likely have influenced the abundance and distribution of this species.

More recently, populations of a native beetle, eastern larch beetle have increased in Minnesota due to less extreme cold in many recent winters. Tamarack in Minnesota has experienced episodic mortality before and bounced back, but if Minnesota's winters continue to warm as predicted due to climate change, tamarack are likely to be further stressed. On the positive side, black-backed woodpeckers are benefitted by larch beetle outbreaks. If you have an interest in considering the effects of climate change on your favorite tree or bird species, you can access the Climate Change Atlas at <http://www.fs.fed.us/nrs/atlas>. The Climate Change Atlas documents the current and possible future distribution of 134 tree species and 147 bird species in the Eastern United States.

Tamarack habitats are used by a variety of wildlife species. It provides cover from summer heat for bear, deer and moose, but is browsed by relatively few species. Snowshoe hares feed on twigs and bark, and porcupines feed on the inner bark. Spruce grouse and sharp-tailed grouse eat the needles and buds. Ospreys nest in the dead trees. Red squirrels cut and store the cones. Mice and voles eat large numbers of the seeds off the ground.

For a neat birding experience, visit the Sax-Zim Bog south of Eveleth. This boreal peatland covers more than 200 square miles of tamarack and spruce lowlands. The roads that cross this bog provide access to swamp habitats that aren't generally all that accessible for bird enthusiasts. Here you will see a number of warblers, include the Connecticut warbler, a species that needs large habitat blocks. In the winter, this area is known for its great gray owls, snowy owls, and northern hawk owls. Over 240 species of birds can be found in the Sax-Zim Bog. You can get an area map at <http://www.saxzimbirdingfestival.com/> . Need a little help getting started? Plans are being made for the 9th annual Sax-Zim Bog winter birding festival, to be held February 12 – 14, 2016.

Tamarack wood is tough, durable, and flexible when in thin strips. It was used for making snowshoes, and the natural crooks located in the stumps and roots were used for making knees in wooden boats. Tamarack poles have been used in corduroy roads because of their resistance to rot. Chemical compounds from the sapwood are used in food and dietary supplements for both human and animal nutrition. Tamarack wood is used for pulpwood, posts, poles, and rough lumber. Tamarack is commonly used for bonsai. Traditional medicinal uses of tamarack included the treatment of arthritis, cold and general aches and pains, as well as a poultice to treat cuts, infected wounds, and frostbite.

Tamarack strikes me as remarkable in so many ways. But for sure, one of my favorite experiences with this tree happened one year after being hassled by my spouse for keeping a Christmas tree too long in the house. To shake things up a bit, I replaced the dried-up white spruce with a tamarack. Totally devoid of all needles in the winter, I decorated my little stick tree with white lights and paper hearts, and gave it a drink of water. I thought it a pretty good joke, but the joked turned out to be on me. A little miracle happened and soft, green needles magically popped out, just in time for Valentine's Day.

