BEAR CREEK NATURE CENTER

A Guide to Common Trees of Bear Creek Nature Center

How to use this guide:

Begin by finding a tree you would like to identify. Then, go through the questions listed below. Follow the instructions based on your answers.

1. Does the tree have scale-like leaves, needles, or broad, flat leaves? If scale-like, go to number 2. If needles, go to number 3. If broad leaves, go to number 8.

Scale-like

Needles

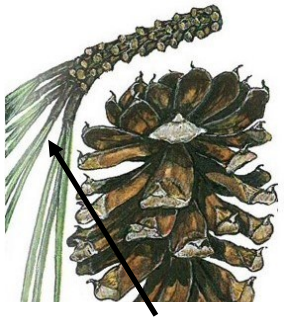
Broad leaves

2. You've found rocky mountain juniper!

The Rocky Mountain Juniper has pale gray bark that is thin and looks shredded. It produces small berries with a blue, waxy coating. These berries take 2 years to mature! When you look closely at the needles, you'll see that they have small leaves that are shaped like pointed scales. Try rubbing the leaves between your fingers to release the wonderful smell!

3. Do the needles grow from the tree in bundles, or does each needle grow off the tree on its own? If it grows in a bundle, go to number 4. If it grows on its own, go to number 5.

Needle growing off branch on its own



Needles growing in bundles

4. Do the needles grow in bundles of 3, and are they 4-7 inches long? If no, go back to number 3. If yes, you've found a Ponderosa Pine!

The Ponderosa Pine is an evergreen tree, meaning its needles stay green year-round. The bark of a Ponderosa Pine is known for its "puzzle-piece" shapes and sweet, candy-like scent (you'll need to get your nose very close to the bark to smell it!). Some people think it smells like butterscotch, while others smell vanilla or maple. What do you smell?

PONDEROSA PINE

5. Pluck a single needle from the tree you are studying and rub it between your forefinger and thumb. Is it flat, or is it round and rolling between your fingers? If flat, go to number 6. If round, go to number 7.

6. You've found a Douglas-fir!

Douglas-fir trees have needles that are about 1 inch long. They are green on top, with two white stripes on their underside. They have cones that are 3-4 inches long with distinct "mouse tails" poking out from underneath the pinecone petals.

7. You've found a Colorado Blue Spruce!

The blue spruce is the state tree of Colorado. Its needles grow up to 1 inch long, while its pale brown cones grow up to 4 inches long. The needles have sharply pointed tips and are gray-green in color, often appearing gray-blue when the needles are young. Try rubbing the needles between your fingers; does the smell remind you of anything?

8. Are the tree's leaves narrow and 2-3 inches long, with gray bark that has deep grooves? Go to number 9. Are the leaves more wide with many different points or lobes? Go to number 10.

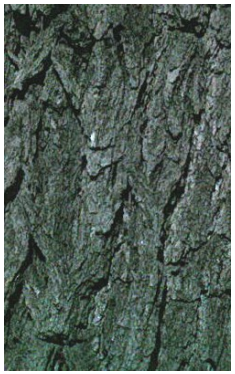
9. You've found a Narrowleaf Cottonwood!

Narrowleaf cottonwoods are commonly found along the creek bed of Bear Creek Nature Center, where the abundant water allows them to grow tall above the other trees and shrubs. Their leaves are shiny and green, growing 2 to 5 inches long. Narrowleaf cotton-woods are deciduous trees, meaning that they lose their leaves in the fall. The bark of the tree is gray, and as it gets older it will have deep furrows.

10. Is the bark of the tree rough with deep lines? Go to number 11. Is it smooth and gray-brown in color? Go to number 12.

11. You've found a Gambel Oak!

Bark of a gambel oak tree →



Gambel oaks, also known as scrub oaks, are sometimes classified as shrubs rather than trees. However, these oaks can grow up to 30 feet, much taller than your average shrub! The leaves of gambel oaks are a dark, glossy green, which turn orange and yellow in the fall before dropping to the ground. The trees also produce acorns, a favorite treat of the black bears, squirrels, deer, and other animals that pass through our nature center trails.

12. You've found a Rocky Mountain Maple!

← Bark of a rocky mountain maple tree

The rocky mountain maple is another tree that may sometimes grow to look like a shrub with many different branches growing straight up from the ground like trunks. Its leaves are usually no wider than 3 inches across with sharply toothed edges all around. The seeds of the rocky mountain maple are attached to "wings" that may remind you of a dragonfly. The wings allow the seeds to travel far when the wind blows them off the tree.