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LIVING

Name that tree

With a little practice, it's quite easy to identify most of our common birds by shape and silhouette alone. Bird shape is dependable. A blue jay is always shaped exactly like a blue jay, and any two starlings will always look plump, have a long beak and sport a short tail.

Trees, unfortunately, are not quite so consistent in this regard. Still, for many species, instant identifications based solely on shape are very possible, even from a moving car and at considerable distances.

Identifying distant trees adds enjoyment to all kinds of outings as you mentally compile a list of the trees and shrubs you observe. I especially enjoy paying attention to the various species I see on long car trips and find it makes the time go faster. It is also a useful skill to have when you are trying to point out the location of distant birds or mammals to someone else... "Do you see the hawk soaring over the white pine on the horizon?"

Whereas deciduous trees are now completely bare, our conifers (cone-bearing trees) are dressed in their finest holiday foliage. Juxtaposed against their leafless neighbours, the unique shape of each species stands out as at no other time of year.

Towering above all other trees is the white pine, the tallest tree in eastern Canada. The irregular crown and stout branches growing at right angles to the trunk make this species instantly recognizable. The crowns of many white pines become almost one-sided in appearance as a result of the effect of the prevailing wind. This asymmetrical look is typical of most mature trees of this species. Jackson Park in Peterborough has a wonderful stand of white pines, most of which have their crown branches concentrated on the east, or down-wind, side of the tree.

The other common pine that is native to the Kawarthas is the red pine. Like the white, large sections of the trunk are visible almost to the top. Unlike most mature white pines, however, the crown of the red pine is usually quite symmetrical. This species also has a very open, airy look, with most of the needles grouped together in ball-like "tufts." This is because the foliage is crowded towards the tips of the branches. The scaly reddish bark also stands out clearly. Remember that pine needles are very long. The red has only two needles, whereas the white pine has five. There is a large planting of red pine on the west side of Armour Road, just south of Hunter Street.

Balsam fir and white spruce also have a very symmetrical appearance. There are subtle differences between the two, however. Firs have a narrow, pyramid-shaped crown which, when seen from a distance, closely resembles a church spire. Although the crown of the white spruce also appears conical, it is more rounded and usually somewhat ragged and irregular-looking. Spruce are particularly easy to identify this year because of the huge number of cones, concentrated at the top of the tree. The weight of the cones is actually making the crowns of some trees lean to the side. Spruce needles spiral all the way around the twig and are usually stiff and "spiky." Fir needles are flat, flexible and usually grow in flat sprays on the twig. Look for white dots on the underside.

The most common spruces in built-up areas are the blue spruce and the Norway spruce. Norway spruce are often planted around farms, too, where they serve as windbreaks. This species is easily distinguished by its large, horizontal branches from which secondary branches hang straight down. This is the common spruce of the forests of northern Europe.

Being able to recognize at a glance the common trees that dominate the landscape provides a very satisfying sense of place



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman



A heavy cone crop at the top of a white spruce (left), and an American elm.

Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner

Because they are only rarely planted as ornamentals, balsam firs are uncommon in the city — other than right now, that is. This species makes a great Christmas tree. It has a wonderful balsamic fragrance, a near-perfect symmetrical shape, and it holds its needles longer than almost any other conifer.

The eastern hemlock is another tree with a conical-shaped crown that becomes ragged with age. Unlike the spruce, however, the very tip of the crown almost always droops, as do the tips of the branches. Hemlock foliage and branches have a feathery look about them, and the tree in general has an untidy outline. The needles are flat, very short and nearly white underneath. This is an important tree for wildlife in the winter. Porcupines and white-tailed deer in particular are attracted to hemlock groves. There are a number of spectacular hemlocks at Jackson Park.

White cedar is another must-know conifer. Trees growing in the open or along forest edges are conical in shape and often clothed with foliage right to the ground. Cedars are unique in that they have scale-like, flattened needles. They are our region's most common evergreen south of the Canadian Shield.

If you happen to be travelling along a road or path adjacent to a swampy area, you may see some trees that could be mistaken at first for dead spruces. These are most likely tamaracks (also known as larch), our only conifer to shed all its needles in the fall. On closer examination, you will find small, open cones still on the tree and hundreds of short,

stubby twigs on which the whorls of soft needles grow next spring. These twigs are similar to the stubby fruit spurs on apple trees.

Take some time to learn to recognize the winter hardwoods, as well. Most species are actually quite distinctive, even based on shape alone. The following comments apply to open habitat specimens such as trees growing along fence rows or around houses. Trees growing in crowded forest conditions will appear quite different, with most of their branches restricted to the crown area.

■ American elms have a vase shape and a tall trunk that divides into large, arching branches.

■ Sugar maples have a straight trunk, distinct for most of its length, with upward-pointing branches and many small, fine twigs. Individual twigs are not easily distinguishable when seen from a distance. The whole tree appears very symmetrical.

■ White ashes appear similar to sugar maples, but have much thicker twigs which stand out individually, even from a distance. Ash trees, therefore, have a much more open looking crown than do maples.

■ Basswoods also appear similar to sugar maples, but usually have several trunks. They are quite common along old fence rows.

■ White oaks often appear broader than tall. Their small side branches are in clusters and give the whole tree a gnarled look.

■ Staghorn sumac is a small tree with branches divided into multiple forks, hence the name "staghorn." It bears erect, red fruit clusters that stand out clearly.

The colour and texture of the bark can also be useful in identifying some species and are often discernible at quite a distance. White birch, of course, has bright, creamy white bark that peels off into papery sheets. Trembling aspen also has whitish (or sometimes greenish) bark, but it is much smoother, with a waxy appearance. The American beech, on the other hand, has thin, smooth, light grey bark.

Twig colour, too, provides useful information. Willows most often have yellowish, orangish or reddish-purple twigs, depending on the species. The twigs in the crowns of distant white birches appear purple.

If you are still in doubt about a given tree's identity, you simply need to look at the tree's buds or, in the case of conifers, the needles. Bud size, colour, shape and location on the twig are distinctive for each species. Honeysuckle, ash, maple, lilac, viburnum, elderberry and dogwood all have buds growing opposite each other, while in nearly all other trees and shrubs, the buds are positioned alternately on the twig.

Being able to recognize at a glance the common trees that dominate the landscape in this beautiful region of Ontario provides a very satisfying sense of place. Like the common loon and the white-tailed deer, the maples, cedars and white pines of the Kawarthas tell us we are home.

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