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Tamarack tree is turncoat evergreen

By GORDON CHARLES
Record-Eagle outdoor editor

HONOR — While maples, aspens, oaks and other hardwoods are doing their "thing" in autumn, so does one odd-ball conifer.

This is the tamarack or larch, the turncoat evergreen. Come fall, this tree turns a brilliant golden color and eventually its needles all fall off.

One of the finest stands of tamarack is found in Benzie County along the Deadstream Road, just west of the Indian Hill Road intersection. The black-top which leads to the northern edge of Big Platte Lake passes by a tamarack swamp which turns a dazzling yellow each fall. In bright sunlight it is a really unusual sight.

Beginning in September and continuing into October, the tamarack begins its change from the green which, until then, left it rather inconspicuous among the pines and other evergreens. Within a few weeks it drops every needle onto a yellow carpet at its feet and prepares to stand bare all winter.

As is the case with conifers, though, the tamarack contains decorative cones and they hang on throughout the winter. Each cone has about a dozen thin, light brown, rounded scales which somewhat match the bark of the tree itself. More often than not, the trees are also decorated with strands of green moss and yellow and green lichens frequently cling to the tree trunk and lower limbs.

Come spring, the dead look gives way to tiny, yellow male flowers on the twigs and large disc-like green, pink and reddish female flowers on the one- to three-year-old branches. The female flowers eventually develop into the little cones which drop their seeds during the fall and winter.

Leaves of the tamarack differ from all other conifers. They are arranged in clusters on short, lateral, spur-like branches and in early spring they are a lovely, soft green which soon darkens into a less dramatic summer foliage. The casual passerby will then very likely overlook them entirely among the other greenery.

Also known as American larch or "hackmatack," the tamarack seldom grows more than 50 feet tall. Most of the large ones were cut long ago in the northern Michigan swamps and second-growth has usually not attained too much height yet.

Colors starting to peak

"Just when will those trees be in their profusion of color this year?" is a question asked with regularity at the Convention Bureau. Several phone calls netted the following advice:

The Department of Natural Resources said dates for the peak color changes will be Oct. 11 through Oct. 25, in the northern region of the Lower Peninsula. The Upper Peninsula, according to the DNR, will peak two weeks earlier.

Charles E. Budd, Travel Bureau representative for Western Michigan, said his figures indicate the colors will



Record-Eagle/Gordon Charles
The tamarack is not much to look at during the summer months but come fall it develops brilliant yellow needles which drop off, leaving it bare all winter.

The wood is tough and rot-resistant and can be used for telephone poles, posts, bridge planking, railroad ties, boats, farm buildings, interior trim and cabinets.

Seeds dropped by the tamarack are relished by red squirrels, ruffed grouse and some songbirds, including the crossbills and siskins. Deer will occasionally browse lightly on the tender twigs, although it is not rated as a good food for them. Snowshoe hares and porcupines will gnaw the tender bark down near the ground.

Early French voyageurs used to brew a beverage from the twigs which was then allowed to ferment and was referred to as "biere d'epinette." Until toward the end of the 1800s, wounds were treated with a mixture of tamarack bark and boughs boiled in water.

Rumor has it that a piece of tamarack root, dug from the east side of a tree on Jan. 1, will turn to gold if carried in your pocket before another New Year.

Maybe you would like to try that one. After all, locating a tamarack right now should be pretty easy in northern Michigan!

peak at that time also, with the core area of northern Michigan which includes Indian River, Gaylord and Grayling, peaking at the same time as that for upper Michigan.

John McMurray, meteorologist with the Community Weather Service in Flint, says the colors will peak earlier this year due to the recent colder temperatures and rainfall.

He predicts prime colors will appear two weeks earlier than expected, starting now and reaching maximum color the last two weeks in September and the first week in October.