

OUR CHANGING WOODLANDS



by J. Dan McAskill, Central District Manager, Dept. of Forestry, Beach Grove

Writings by visitors to Prince Edward Island in the 1700 and 1800's describe a dense forest composed of beech, sugar maple, yellow birch and occasionally red oak, in which white pine, hemlock, white cedar, fir, spruce, larch, birch and poplar were mixed and sometimes predominant. This forest was viewed by Islanders of the times as both a blessing and a curse. It provided the building material for their homes and at the same time it was their foe in the struggle to grow crops. Homesteaders cut and burned the forest to expand the amount of cleared land they had available for crops, and these fires often became uncontrolled holocausts that destroyed thousands of acres of woodland. One fire alone in about 1740, burned the forest along the entire north shore of the province from East Point to Bedford Bay, destroying the fishing vessels at both Morell and St. Peter's in its track.

The construction of the schooner 'Betsy' in 1783 by Samuel and Alexander Fullerton at Savage Harbour, heralded the beginning of the shipbuilding industry on the Island. It expanded to a peak in the mid 1800's and had trickled to a virtual standstill by the early 1900's. The harvesting of quality timber for the shipbuilding industry and the export of shiploads of squared lumber and masts to Britain, completed the virtual eradication of the virgin forest on Prince Edward Island.

Today the Island has 682,500 acres of forest land which represents 48.1% of the Island's total area. It is composed of 35% softwood (i.e. woods with greater than 75% conifer trees), 35 % mixed wood, and 30 % hardwood (i.e. woods with greater than 75% deciduous trees). The principal tree and shrub species are white spruce, red maple, balsam fir, sugar maple, beech, black spruce, white birch, pin cherry, trembling aspen, large-tooth aspen, alder and serviceberry. Species that may be listed as uncommon to rare include ash, red spruce, hemlock, ironwood and red oak. Species identification can be undertaken throughout the year using leaf, bud and/or bark characteristics. Table 1. gives a list of keys which are available and some pertinent information on the features which I find either distract or enhance their usefulness.

The Department of Energy and Forestry provides a number of programs for assisting private woodlot owners in the province. Principal among these is the Woodlot Incentive Program which provides financial incentives to assist woodlot owners in activities such as thinning, site preparation, reforestation, plantation maintenance, boundary line establishment, road building and bridge construction. Woodlot owners with 10 or more acres of woodland are eligible for portions or all of this program, depending on the exact size of their woodlot. This program allows the owner to specify the objectives he or she wishes to follow in managing the woodlot, and these include wildlife, recreational and/or aesthetic enhancement. Other programs and services offered by the Department include reforestation, seedling supply, forest fire control, forest extension, insect and disease identification and the provision of market and inventory information. If you are interested in any of these programs contact your District Forestry Office at Beach Grove, (892-2055), Southampton, (961-2172) or Wellington, (854-2155).

During a recent talk to the Natural History Society I displayed a number of identification guides which are useful in identifying the majority of the trees and shrubs encountered on Prince Edward Island. The following list is by no means complete but it will provide you with some basic information on the guides with which I am familiar. My comments as to the particular features of each are subjective.