

GREAT SLAVE LAKE EAST ARM PLANT FIELD GUIDE

East Arm subarctic shield • Seasons 6, 7



TREES

EDIBLE

TOXIC

TRADITION

KNOWLEDGE • SKILL • DISCIPLINE • SURVIVAL

Independent educational field guide • verify current laws, local conditions, and expert guidance

REGION AT A GLANCE

Boreal trees, persistent berries, muskeg hazards and traditional-use plants of the subarctic shield.

Filming region: East Arm of Great Slave Lake, Northwest Territories, Canada

Alone season(s): 6, 7

Ecology: Boreal Shield and subarctic taiga with exposed bedrock, black spruce muskeg, jack pine, birch and cold lake shorelines

The East Arm combines deep cold water, granitic bedrock, thin soils, fire-shaped jack pine woodland and extensive black spruce wetlands. Plant growth is slow, woody stems are often small, and edible fruit production varies sharply with frost, fire history and exposure. Wetland plants deserve special caution because the most dangerous species often grow beside useful berries and roots.

FIELD PRIORITIES

- Learn black spruce, white spruce and jack pine by needles, cones and site moisture.
- Do not dig or taste roots from marshes, sedge beds or slow water margins.
- Use persistent berries only after confirming the whole shrub and fruit crown.
- Protect thin organic soils and lichens; travel and harvesting damage can last for years.
- Treat all traditional medicinal uses as cultural documentation, not field prescriptions.

NON-NEGOTIABLE PLANT SAFETY

Never consume a plant from one photo, one common name or one guide. Positive identification requires multiple traits and a reliable regional source. Do not experiment with medicinal dosing. For suspected poisoning, remove plant material from the mouth, preserve a sample or photo, contact emergency services or a poison centre, and do not induce vomiting unless directed.

POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION PROTOCOL

Use a repeatable process. Confidence is built from independent features, not intuition.

- 1

1. PLACE

Record habitat, moisture, slope, elevation and nearby dominant plants.
- 2

2. FORM

Decide tree, shrub, vine, herb, grass-like plant, fern or succulent.
- 3

3. LEAVES

Check arrangement, shape, edge, veins, hairs, odor and underside.
- 4

4. STEM & BARK

Look for thorns, sap, pith, lenticels, buds, twig color and texture.
- 5

5. FLOWER / FRUIT

Count petals, inspect clusters, seed structures and fruit attachment.
- 6

6. CROSS-CHECK

Match at least three reliable sources and rule out every dangerous look-alike.

AUTOMATIC STOP LIST

No tasting to identify.
No wetland roots.
No unknown white umbels.
No unknown bulbs.
No unknown milky sap.
No medicinal experiments.

DOCUMENTATION KIT

Photograph whole plant, leaf top and bottom, stem, bark, flowers, fruit and habitat. Add a scale object. Record date, location and confidence. Never let an AI label overrule a regional botanist.

TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

BLACK SPRUCE

TREE / WOODY

Picea mariana

IDENTIFY

Narrow spire-like crown, short four-sided blue-green needles, small dark cones that may remain for years, and scaly gray-brown bark.

HABITAT & SEASON

Muskeg, peatlands, cold wet flats and thin rocky soils. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Small straight poles, roots and resinous dry twigs can support shelter, lashings and fire systems. Lower dead branches often remain dry beneath the crown.

CAUTION

Shallow roots make trees prone to windthrow. Dense smoky wood should not be burned in poorly ventilated shelters.

LOOK-ALIKES

White spruce has longer needles, larger cones and usually favors better-drained ground.

1

WHITE SPRUCE

TREE / WOODY

Picea glauca

IDENTIFY

Sharp single needles with a pungent odor when crushed, larger flexible cones and a fuller crown than black spruce.

HABITAT & SEASON

Well-drained lake terraces, river mouths, slopes and sheltered valleys. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Strong poles, roots and wood for frames, utensils and fuel. Young flexible roots have documented lashing and basketry use.

CAUTION

Do not strip living roots. Spruce pitch can irritate skin and contaminate wounds.

LOOK-ALIKES

Black spruce cones are smaller and persistent; white spruce bark is often lighter and flaky.

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TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

JACK PINE

TREE / WOODY

Pinus banksiana

IDENTIFY
Two short twisted needles per bundle, irregular crown and strongly curved cones that often remain closed on branches.

HABITAT & SEASON
Dry sandy ridges, burned areas and exposed bedrock. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE
Resin-rich dead wood is excellent kindling and fuel. Straight saplings can provide light poles where collection is legal.

CAUTION
Pitchy wood produces sparks and soot. Standing fire-killed trees can fall without warning.

LOOK-ALIKES
Lodgepole pine is similar but generally has longer needles and more symmetrical cones; its range overlaps only locally.

3

PAPER BIRCH

TREE / WOODY

Betula papyrifera

IDENTIFY
White peeling bark with dark horizontal lenticels; oval doubly toothed leaves; hanging catkins.

HABITAT & SEASON
Burns, lake terraces, sheltered slopes and mixed forest. Season: Year-round bark and wood

DOCUMENTED USE
Loose dead bark is dependable tinder and a short-term waterproofing material. Wood carves well and burns hot when dry.

CAUTION
Never peel bark around a living trunk. Birch bark burns rapidly and can spread fire beyond the hearth.

LOOK-ALIKES
Aspen bark is smooth green-gray and does not peel in papery sheets.

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TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

TAMARACKTREE / WOODY

Larix laricina

IDENTIFY
Soft needles in clusters on short spur shoots, tiny upright cones and bright yellow autumn foliage that falls before winter.

HABITAT & SEASON
Fens, muskeg margins and wet lowlands. Season: Year-round wood; needles spring through fall

DOCUMENTED USE
Rot-resistant poles and roots have documented use in snowshoes, frames and lashings. Dry wood makes durable fuel.

CAUTION
Wet tamarack is difficult to ignite. Small bog trees may be centuries old; harvest only dead or permitted material.

LOOK-ALIKES
Spruces retain needles in winter and have single sharp needles.

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BALSAM POPLARTREE / WOODY

Populus balsamifera

IDENTIFY
Tall river-valley tree with pointed oval leaves, pale undersides and sticky fragrant buds; gray bark becomes furrowed.

HABITAT & SEASON
Floodplains, river mouths, lake shore benches and moist valleys. Season: Buds late winter to spring; wood year-round

DOCUMENTED USE
Light wood for carving and quick fuel. Aromatic buds have documented traditional external preparations.

CAUTION
Bud resin may trigger salicylate or fragrance reactions. Dead trunks can rot internally.

LOOK-ALIKES
Trembling aspen has rounder leaves and flattened stalks; willow leaves are narrower.

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DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods only. Positive identification and safe preparation remain essential.

LINGONBERRY / MOUNTAIN CRANBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Vaccinium vitis-idaea

IDENTIFY
Low evergreen shrub with leathery oval leaves, pale dotted undersides, pink urn-shaped flowers and bright red berries.

HABITAT & SEASON
Open spruce forest, rocky heaths and bog hummocks. Season: Late summer through winter

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are documented food and often persist beneath early snow. They can be cooked, dried or eaten fresh after cleaning.

CAUTION
Confirm the evergreen leaves and fruit crown. Avoid berries from animal latrines or polluted shorelines.

LOOK-ALIKES
Bearberry fruit is drier and mealy; its leaves have netted veins and lack pale underside dots.

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BOG BLUEBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Vaccinium uliginosum

IDENTIFY
Low woody shrub with blue-green oval leaves, pink urn flowers and blue berries with a waxy bloom and crown.

HABITAT & SEASON
Muskeg hummocks, tundra-like heaths and moist open forest. Season: Late summer

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are documented food and an important seasonal resource.

CAUTION
Fruit production varies. Check woody stems, leaf arrangement and the fruit crown; never identify only by color.

LOOK-ALIKES
Bilberry has green angular stems and usually darker juice; black-berried herbs lack woody stems.

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DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods only. Positive identification and safe preparation remain essential.

CROWBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Empetrum nigrum

IDENTIFY
Mat-forming evergreen shrub with tiny needle-like leaves grooved beneath and shiny black berries nestled along the stems.

HABITAT & SEASON
Rocky heaths, windswept shorelines, bog margins and open spruce woodland. Season: Late summer through winter

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are documented food, water-rich but mild. They often remain after frost.

CAUTION
Berries can accumulate animal contamination close to the ground. Confirm the creeping evergreen mat.

LOOK-ALIKES
Juniper has sharper leaves in whorls and blue cones with a bloom; crowberry fruit is glossy black.

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CLOUDBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Rubus chamaemorus

IDENTIFY
Low unarmed plant with one rounded lobed leaf per flowering stem and a single amber-orange raspberry-like fruit.

HABITAT & SEASON
Peatlands, bog edges and wet tundra-like openings. Season: Mid- to late summer

DOCUMENTED USE
Fully ripe amber fruit is a prized documented food and can be eaten fresh or cooked.

CAUTION
Unripe red fruit is sour and firm. Bog travel may be hazardous; harvest without trampling moss hummocks.

LOOK-ALIKES
Dwarf raspberry species may have red fruit and more divided leaves; cloudberry fruit is solitary and amber when ripe.

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DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods only. Positive identification and safe preparation remain essential.

PRICKLY ROSE

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Rosa acicularis

IDENTIFY

Prickly stems, compound toothed leaves, pink five-petaled flowers and red oval hips.

HABITAT & SEASON

Open woods, burns, shore terraces and thickets. Season: Hips late summer through winter

DOCUMENTED USE

Hip flesh is documented food after irritating hairs and seeds are removed; suitable for simmering or drying.

CAUTION

Seed hairs irritate mouth and skin. Avoid moldy fruit. Thorns can damage hands and inflatable gear.

LOOK-ALIKES

Hawthorns have simple lobed leaves and woody thorns; roses have compound leaves.

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FIREWEED

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Chamerion angustifolium

IDENTIFY

Tall colony-forming herb with narrow willow-like leaves, magenta four-petaled flowers and long capsules releasing silky seed.

HABITAT & SEASON

Burns, shore gravel, disturbed camps and forest openings. Season: Young shoots spring; flowers summer

DOCUMENTED USE

Young shoots and leaves have documented food use after correct identification and cooking. Dry seed fluff and stalk fiber have limited craft uses.

CAUTION

Older leaves become fibrous and bitter. Do not confuse young shoots with toxic wetland plants before leaves unfold.

LOOK-ALIKES

Purple loosestrife has opposite leaves and many smaller flowers; fireweed flowers have four broad petals.

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TOXIC PLANTS - AVOID

High-consequence species to recognize before any gathering begins.

SPOTTED WATER HEMLOCK

TOXIC - AVOID

Cicuta maculata

IDENTIFY

Wetland perennial with divided leaves, white umbrella-shaped flower clusters and thick chambered roots; veins often end between leaf teeth.

HABITAT & SEASON

Marshes, wet meadows, stream mouths and sedge margins. Season: Spring through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

No use. Establish a strict no-root-harvest zone in wet ground.

CAUTION

Extremely poisonous; roots are especially dangerous and may cause seizures and death. Do not taste.

LOOK-ALIKES

Angelica and cow parsnip can appear similar; this family requires expert identification.

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RED BANEERRY

TOXIC - AVOID

Actaea rubra

IDENTIFY

Woodland herb with divided compound leaves, small white flower clusters and glossy red berries on stout stalks, often with a dark dot.

HABITAT & SEASON

Moist spruce-birch forest, rich slopes and streambanks. Season: Fruit late summer

DOCUMENTED USE

No food use.

CAUTION

Berries and roots are poisonous and can affect the gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems. Children are especially at risk.

LOOK-ALIKES

Red huckleberry is a woody shrub with simple leaves and translucent berries, not a divided-leaved herb.

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TOXIC PLANTS - AVOID

High-consequence species to recognize before any gathering begins.

BOG ROSEMARY

TOXIC - AVOID

Andromeda polifolia

IDENTIFY

Low evergreen bog shrub with narrow rolled-edge leaves, white beneath, and small pink urn-shaped flowers.

HABITAT & SEASON

Sphagnum bogs and peatland hummocks. Season: Year-round leaves; flowers early summer

DOCUMENTED USE

No food or tea use.

CAUTION

Contains grayanotoxin-type compounds; ingestion may cause vomiting, dizziness and heart effects.

LOOK-ALIKES

Labrador tea has broader rusty-haired leaf undersides and terminal white flower clusters.

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NORTHERN MONKSHOOD

TOXIC - AVOID

Aconitum delphiniifolium

IDENTIFY

Deeply divided palmate leaves and dark blue to purple hood-shaped flowers on upright stems.

HABITAT & SEASON

Moist tundra, streambanks, mountain meadows and rich open forest. Season: Summer

DOCUMENTED USE

No food or medicinal use.

CAUTION

All parts contain potent aconitine alkaloids. Ingestion can cause fatal heart and nerve effects; sap from roots should be avoided.

LOOK-ALIKES

Larkspur flowers have a distinct rear spur; both are unsafe.

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TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

Published cultural or historical uses - not prescriptions or dosing advice.

LABRADOR TEA

TRADITIONAL-USE

Rhododendron groenlandicum

IDENTIFY

Evergreen shrub with narrow leathery leaves rolled under at the edges and densely rusty-woolly beneath; white flower clusters.

HABITAT & SEASON

Muskeg, wet spruce forest and peatland margins. Season: Year-round leaves; flowers early summer

DOCUMENTED USE

A culturally important plant with documented use as a beverage and for other traditional purposes.

CAUTION

Use only with local expert guidance. Strong or repeated infusions may cause illness, and bog rosemary is a dangerous look-alike.

LOOK-ALIKES

Bog rosemary leaves are narrower and pale beneath, not rusty-woolly.

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YARROW

TRADITIONAL-USE

Achillea millefolium

IDENTIFY

Aromatic finely divided leaves and flat clusters of small white to pink flower heads.

HABITAT & SEASON

Dry shore gravel, trails, burns and disturbed soil. Season: Summer through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

Published traditional uses include external washes and aromatic preparations. Fully dry flower tops can serve as light tinder.

CAUTION

Possible allergy, pregnancy and anticoagulant concerns. Do not use dirty plant material on open wounds.

LOOK-ALIKES

Poison hemlock is much taller with hollow purple-spotted stems and umbrella flower clusters.

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TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

Published cultural or historical uses - not prescriptions or dosing advice.

WILLOW

TRADITIONAL-USE

Salix species

IDENTIFY
Woody shrubs or small trees with alternate narrow leaves, flexible twigs and catkins; species identification can be difficult.

HABITAT & SEASON
Shorelines, wet thickets, river mouths and tundra valleys. Season: Year-round twigs; catkins spring

DOCUMENTED USE
Flexible stems for baskets, wattle and light bindings. Published traditional uses include bark preparations related to salicylates.

CAUTION
Do not self-dose willow bark, especially with aspirin allergy, bleeding risk, kidney disease or in children with viral illness.

LOOK-ALIKES
Dwarf birch has round toothed leaves; alder bears woody cone-like female catkins.

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COMMON JUNIPER

TRADITIONAL-USE

Juniperus communis var. depressa

IDENTIFY
Low spreading evergreen with stiff sharp needles in whorls of three, each with a pale band; blue-black berry-like cones.

HABITAT & SEASON
Dry rocky ridges, open pine forest and exposed shore terraces. Season: Cones late summer through winter

DOCUMENTED USE
Small amounts of ripe cones have documented culinary and traditional uses; resinous twigs can scent smoke but are not primary fuel.

CAUTION
Not for pregnancy or kidney disease, and not for unsupervised medicinal use. Confirm whorled sharp needles; other junipers vary.

LOOK-ALIKES
Crowberry has softer tiny leaves tightly pressed to creeping stems and glossy black berries.

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SEASONAL AND HABITAT PLANNING

Availability is local and variable. Use these patterns to plan observation, not to assume harvest.

PHASE	WHAT TO EXPECT	FIELD EMPHASIS
SPRING / THAW	New shoots, flowers, catkins and wetland hazards become visible.	Learn leaves and flowers before fruit; avoid roots and bulbs.
SUMMER / PEAK GROWTH	Maximum foliage; most edible greens and traditional-use herbs are identifiable.	Photograph multiple traits; note habitat and abundance.
AUTUMN / FRUIT & FROST	Most berries, hips, cones and seed structures mature.	Confirm entire plant; leave food for wildlife and regeneration.
WINTER / PERSISTENT	Evergreen shrubs, bark, twigs, cones and persistent fruit remain.	Rely on woody traits; snow and frost obscure herb identification.

HABITAT FORECAST

HABITAT	LIKELY PLANTS	PRIMARY RISK
Dry ridge / exposed slope	Black spruce, White spruce, Jack pine	Windthrow, fire, protected slow-growing plants
Moist forest / sheltered valley	Paper birch, Tamarack, Balsam poplar	Look-alikes, falling timber, poor visibility
Wetland / peat / stream edge	Spotted water hemlock, Red baneberry	Water hemlock or toxic bog shrubs; unstable ground
Open disturbance / camp edge	Lingonberry / mountain cranberry, Bog blueberry, Crowberry, Cloudberry	Contamination, invasive species, human chemicals

SEASONAL REALITY

A late frost, drought, fire, flood, browsing pressure or poor flowering year can remove an expected food source. Build plans around several independent resources and assume that every crop may fail.

LOOK-ALIKE AND HAZARD MATRIX

The most important plant knowledge is often knowing what not to touch, taste or dig.

HAZARD	FIELD CUE	RULE
Spotted water hemlock	Wetland perennial with divided leaves, white umbrella-shaped flower clusters and thick chambered roots; veins often end between leaf teeth.	Extremely poisonous; roots are especially dangerous and may cause seizures and death. Do not taste.
Red baneberry	Woodland herb with divided compound leaves, small white flower clusters and glossy red berries on stout stalks, often with a dark dot.	Berries and roots are poisonous and can affect the gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems. Children are especially at risk.
Bog rosemary	Low evergreen bog shrub with narrow rolled-edge leaves, white beneath, and small pink urn-shaped flowers.	Contains grayanotoxin-type compounds; ingestion may cause vomiting, dizziness and heart effects.
Northern monkshood	Deeply divided palmate leaves and dark blue to purple hood-shaped flowers on upright stems.	All parts contain potent aconitine alkaloids. Ingestion can cause fatal heart and nerve effects; sap from roots should be avoided.

SUSPECTED POISONING

1. Stop exposure.

2. Remove material from mouth; rinse.

3. Do not induce vomiting.

4. Save a sample/photo.

5. Call emergency services or poison control.

6. Monitor breathing and consciousness.

HARVEST ETHICS

Take the common, leave the rare.

Never girdle a tree.

Avoid roots and whole plants.

Leave wildlife food.

Follow Indigenous and protected-area rules.

Restore disturbed ground.

SOURCES, SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Taxonomy and regional occurrence change. Verify the current name, distribution and legal status before publication or field use.

1. Flora of North America North of Mexico
Flora of North America Association - scientific flora

http://floranorthamerica.org/Main_Page

2. Plants and biodiversity resources of the Northwest Territories
Government of the Northwest Territories - regional flora and ecology

<https://www.gov.nt.ca/ecc/en/services/biodiversity>

3. Aboriginal Plant Use in Canada's Northwest Boreal Forest
Marles, Clavelle, Monteleone, Tays and Burns; Canadian Forest Service - ethnobotany

<https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.611374/publication.html>

4. Plants of the World Online
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew - taxonomy and distribution

<https://powo.science.kew.org/>

5. Canadian Poisonous Plants Information System and poison-safety resources
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada / Canadian poison centres - poison safety

<https://infopoison.ca/>

INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION NOTICE

This guide is an independent educational reference and is not affiliated with HISTORY, the Alone television series, local Indigenous governments or protected-area authorities. Traditional-use notes summarize published sources and do not transfer cultural authority. Local knowledge holders, current regulations and qualified medical or botanical professionals take precedence.