

# IDENTIFYING ASPEN

Aspen has many features which help identification. Many are useful only at certain times of year, but one of Aspen's most characteristic features is that it typically occurs in groups. This is because it throws up suckers which establish as new trees close to the 'parent'. These new trees (or ramets) are genetically identical to the 'parent' tree. As a result, Aspen often occurs as small groves of trees. These small stands often comprise a single 'clone'.

*Mature trees (left) send up suckers. Some of these have developed into young stems along a fence line.*



In summer, the trembling foliage is a give-away. In a gentle breeze, you can even locate aspen trees from the sound they make. But in a strong wind, most trees make a sound, so beware.

Aspen leaves have a characteristic shape, with a long, flattened petiole (stem).

But, unless you are reasonably close, spotting aspen in high summer is often not that easy. All trees are in leaf, and they are all green.

*Aspen leaves have a distinctive shape and fluttering habit.*

The presence of suckers in open ground adjacent to mature trees is a feature of many Aspen stands. However, some clones do not sucker profusely. The appearance of suckers also depends on grazing levels.

*Leaves on suckers are often rather narrow and pointed — quite different from those on more mature stems*



Autumn is often the best time of year to see the composition of a wood. As the season progresses, the difference between each tree species becomes apparent. The foliage colour, the timing of leaf fall and crown shape all help to distinguish one tree from another.

Aspen often turn a bright yellow in the autumn, but not all clones colour well. In addition, some lose their leaves very early, while others retain some leaves even into the winter.



*One stand (left) has lost most of its leaves on 27 September, while another (above) displays yellow foliage on 28 October.*

In winter and early spring, when deciduous trees are bare, aspen can be remarkably easy to pick out from other species, even at long range. Its clonal habit, pale bark and crown shape contrast with most other species, especially birch, with which it most commonly associates.



*Although Aspen is variable, it is usually easy to pick out from other trees in winter*

Aspen is also easily spotted in late spring and early summer. It is one of the last trees to come into leaf, so during May, when most other trees have flushed, aspen can stand out quite starkly, still in its winter clothes.

The most obvious exception to this is ash, which also flushes late. However, a close inspection of the crown shape and branching habit should help to differentiate them.



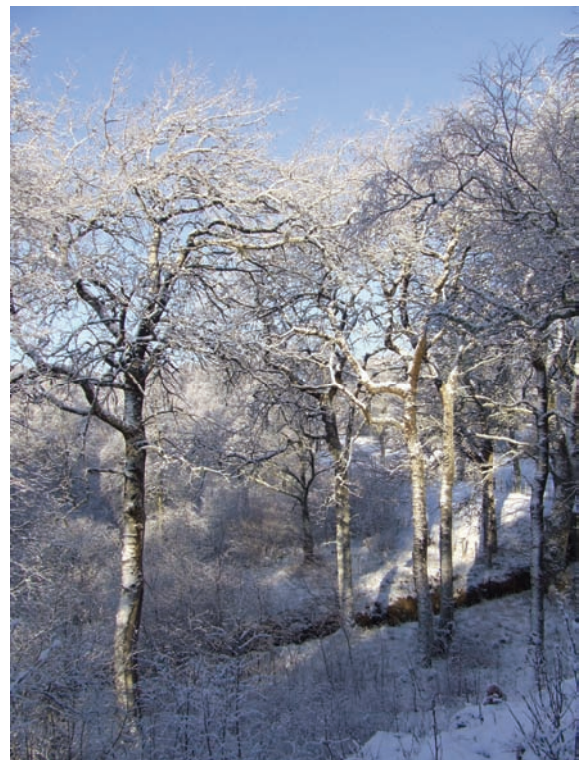
*As other broadleaves start to come into leaf in late spring, so Aspen becomes increasingly conspicuous.*



### Confusion with other trees

It is possible to confuse our Eurasian Aspen *Populus tremula* with some other poplar species and hybrids, especially at certain times of year.

White poplar *Populus alba*, a native of continental Europe, is readily distinguished from Aspen in summer. It has deeply lobed leaves with a strikingly white underside. However, white poplar also hybridises freely with aspen. The hybrids are known as Grey Poplar (*P. alba x tremula* or *x canescens*). Like many hybrids, *P. x canescens* is more vigorous than either parent. It is widely planted, and can be confused with Aspen in winter. It can grow larger than most Aspen, and usually has more deeply fissured bark.



*Hybrid poplars may share a lot of features with *P. tremula**

Quaking aspen *Populus tremuloides* is the North American cousin of our *Populus tremula*. Relatively few appear to have been planted in UK. However, hybrids between Quaking and Eurasian Aspen are more common, and some have been planted in Scotland.

Like other hybrids, *P. tremula x tremuloides* is vigorous. Apart from this, it may be difficult to distinguish from either parent. Location may sometimes be a clue to identity. Poplar hybrids are more likely to be encountered near roads, in policy woods and close to habitation.

But don't rely on this. The Victorians (and many foresters since) had a penchant for leaving their mark on the wild, and planted trees in some remarkably remote spots.