

Recreation Opportunity Guide**WESTERN LARCH**

Tamarack

A truly unusual, fascinating and important tree. Its uniqueness, however, is a threat to its life. Because its needles turn yellow and later fall to the ground, the larch may appear dead during the winter, even though it is very much alive.

When gathering firewood, please don't mistake a living larch for a dead one! To tell the difference between a living western larch and a dead one in the wintertime, examine the twigs. Larch needles grow from short spurs which are conspicuous on living larch trees. These spurs, like rows of tiny barrels, are absent from a dead larch. In addition, the bark on a live larch tree will be tight. If you accidentally cut into a live tree, its wood will be wet. STOP cutting immediately if this happens!

Identifying a Western Larch

Each season of the year presents the larch in a different dress. **Fall. winter. spring or summer?** the larch can be easily recognized. In the fall of the year, the needles of the western larch turn a straw yellow, contrasting sharply with the green of surrounding trees. The needles soon drop to the ground, leaving the larch bare of foliage throughout the winter and early spring. Larch is the only cone-bearing tree in the western United States that sheds all of its needles. This unusual characteristic makes identification absolutely certain. In the spring, look for fine, pale green, new needles. Its narrow crown has an open appearance and the entire trunk and all of the short horizontal limbs can be seen.

Larch Balls

When the shed needles of the larch fall into lakes, the current action causes them to cluster and eventually to knit together forming a dense ball. If you are lucky and have good eyes, you might find such a treasure. It could measure from an inch to 9 or more inches in diameter. The Tamaracks Resort has a collection of larch balls.

Trees grow big in the water-abundant Seeley-Swan valleys, but the granddaddy of them all is a **1,000-year-old western larch**, known locally as **Gus**. A gentle, mile-long nature trail loops through the Girard Grove near the western shore of Seeley Lake.

There are plenty of big trees in this 250-acre grove, averaging perhaps 600 years old, but Gus stands out as the champion. In fact, Gus appears to be the largest larch tree in the world among the 10 species found primarily in North America, Asia and Europe.

Where's Gus? From the Seeley Lake Historical Museum and Visitor Center, north to Boy Scout Road, turn left. Proceed across the Clearwater River bridge for about ¼ mile to the small parking area on left side of road. Hike trail to the right for about 100 yards.