

ZAU ZOURA /SD AYER – POST N°5 : TREES AND SHRUBS

This light penetrated forest enables trees and shrubs to grow.

This forest is dominated by **larches** (*Larix decidua*). Remarkably, it also includes **arolla Pines or Swiss pines** (*Pinus cembra*). Because it allows light to penetrate, a dense undergrowth can be found on the forest floor especially **saplings** and **sub-shrubs**. Do you think you know what they are?

Saplings are young trees; they have an elongated stem, or trunk. They will grow into trees. Here are a few examples:

- The **Arolla pine** (*Pinus cembra*) is a conifer that grows at high altitudes. Its needle shaped leaves are attached in groups of 3 to 5. The timber is strong and of good quality and therefore has been overexploited. Because of its slow growth rate it nearly became extinct due to lack of renewal. Its seeds are dispersed principally by the spotted nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*).
- The **larch** (*Larix decidua*) is the only Swiss conifer whose leaves fall in winter. Its light green leaves are soft and needle-like, 2-4cm long, and grow in tufts of 35-40 from short woody knobs, or shoots, on the twigs unlike...
- ... The **spruce** (*Picea abies*), which has short angular tough needle shaped leaves attached singly around twigs. This common tree is grown for its timber.
- The **rowan or mountain-ash** (*Sorbus aucuparia*) bears compound leaves and orange-red berries that birds feed on in winter. Thrushes enjoy feeding on them and while they are feeding they are an easy prey for fowlers (professional bird catchers).

Shrubs are woody plants that can reach 4 to 5 metres in height when mature. When they are under 0.5 metre high, they are called **sub-shrubs**. Those around you are typical of a sand barren context : they must withstand soil acidity caused by pine needles that take a

long time decaying. See if you can identify some of them:

- The **bilberry** (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and the **lingonberry** (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) provide food for black grouse (Tetrao tetrix), ptarmigan (Lagopus muta), and rock partridges (Alectoris graeca), which are all endangered species.
- The **shrubby milkwort** (*Polygala chamaebuxus*) bears pretty bicolor flowers that come in a range of colours including creamy white tipped with yellow, red, purplish and even pink.
- The **rhododendron** (*Rhododendron ferrugineum*), whose leaves seem « rusty » on their under side is also referred to as the Alpine Rose because of its large hot pink fragrant flowers.

It takes several centuries for a forest of this type to reach maturity.

Text : Céline Vuitton et Mirko D'inverno, field botanists

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