

Boreal Forests

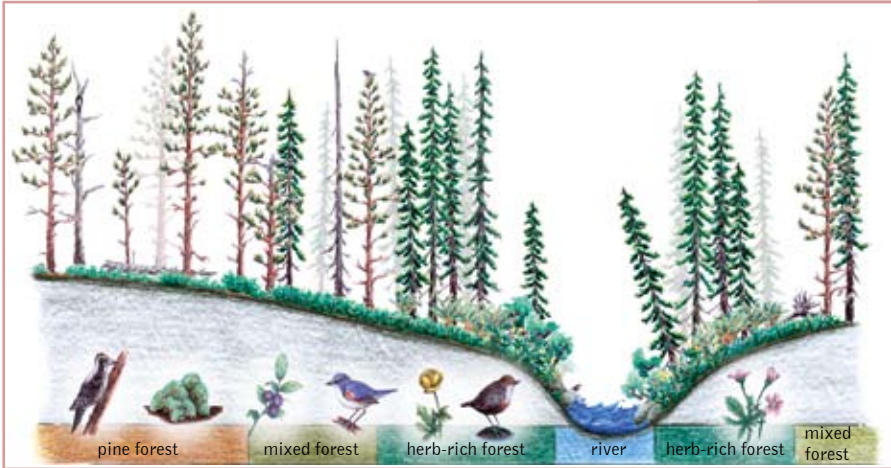
Pine and mixed forests are encountered along routes 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17 and 19. Spruce-dominated forests are found along routes 1, 5, 6, 8, 10, 16, 17, 18 and 19. For good examples of herb-rich forests, try routes 3, 7, 16, 17, 18 and 19.

The northern or boreal forest – sometimes called by its Russian name ‘taiga’ – is vast by any standards. It grows in a broad belt all around the globe. Of all the world’s ecosystems, it covers the largest surface. Its endlessness is immediately evident when you are walking in the forest. On any of the walks in this guidebook, or even along any of the roads in the area, to find solitude, it is enough to stop at a random place and walk some fifty metres away from the track or road. You won’t find a single trace of human presence and will be alone with the deep, complete silence that is so typical of the boreal forest. Outside of the mosquito season, there is little to stimulate the senses; just trees, trees, trees and yet more trees. The boreal wilderness is so vast and indifferent, that it may feel quite eerie.

Taiga is the most widespread of the Lappish habitats, covering thousands of square kilometres. It is made up of only four key tree species: Siberian Spruce – closely related to the common Norway Spruce but more spear-shaped in appearance – Scots Pine, Downy and Silver Birch. There is a supporting cast of Trembling Aspen, Rowan, Goat Willow, Bird Cherry and Grey Alder, particularly in the more lush and secluded forests.

The competition between Pine and Spruce for a place in the forest is a battle between strength and endurance. Spruce is the stronger and in any battle with Pine it will eventually win, because it can grow in sheltered conditions, thus thriving where pine can’t. But Pine can persist where Spruce will fail. Pine is the dominant tree or even the only one on dry, cold or wet sites. Here, it endures and Spruce dies. In the south, Pine and Spruce are both very common species, but the further north one travels, the more Spruce becomes restricted to specific sites where growth conditions are a little better. North of the line Ounastunturi – Ivalo Spruce has even disappeared entirely, leaving the terrain for Pine and Downy Birch.

The Birch is even harder than Pine and grows on the flanks of the fells where Pine has given up. In the boreal forest, Downy Birch is mostly a pioneer tree, dominant in abandoned fields, river sides and bog edges, but on the edge of the fell it forms extensive expanses of small, shrubby trees (see page 40 and text box on page 46). This mountain birch zone is unique



to Scandinavia. A little further east, in European Russia, it is the Siberian Spruce and Siberian Larch that are the ultimate tree species.

The boreal forest is overwhelming, literally awesome and even frightening in its size, its indifference and its all-encompassing silence. Paradoxically, at the same time, it can also appear a bit dull. Not only are the trees an endless repetition of themselves, but so is the undergrowth – a hardly changing mixture of Cowberry, Bilberry, Crowberry, Bearberry, Chickweed Wintergreen, mosses and lichens.

Fortunately, there are better ways to explore the boreal forest than randomly picking a direction and hope for the best (this including the hope of ever emerging). On closer observation, the apparently uniform boreal forest with its meagre four tree species has various different aspects.

Old-growth forest

The largest expanse of old-growth forest in Europe (outside Russia) is found in Finnish Lapland. The term 'old-growth' is often used as synonym to primeval, virgin or untouched forests, but technically it is less strict a term. Old-growth means that every stage of tree – from seedling to forest giant, but also from snag (a dead, standing tree) to nearly decayed, moss covered fallen trunk – is present in the forest. For this state to develop, generations of trees need to have come and gone, but it does not necessarily mean that man has never used or entered the forest (the Sámi have lived in and used the forests for generations).

The boreal forest is dominated by Scots Pine on the dry ridges and Siberian Spruce on the moister and more nutrient-rich flanks. The herb-rich forests of the river valleys is the most beautiful forest types, with the highest concentrations of plant and bird species. Species from left to right: Three-toed Woodpecker, Reindeer Lichen, Bilberry, Red-flanked Bluetail, Globe-flower, Dipper and Wood Crane's-bill.