



Wilderness Society
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WILD K L O N D I K E



As you drive the Klondike Highway, ride the train into the White Pass, or hike the Chilkoot Trail, you will travel through a variety of habitats including the coastal rainforest, alpine tundra, and boreal forest. Each of these habitats is diversely unique while related to its neighboring community.

The **coastal rainforests** of Southeast Alaska are characterized by plentiful moisture and lush vegetation. Plants flourish on large quantities of sunlight during the summer months. Nutrients come from organic material and rainfall, as elsewhere, but the coastal rainforests also obtain nutrients from the ocean when fish swim into fresh water streams to spawn and die.

The coastal rainforests around Skagway are unusual. Summers are warm and relatively dry – conditions which favor wildlife movement between the coast and interior. Also, south-facing hillsides forested with pine and birch are exposed to more intense sun, making them drier and subject to forest fires, unlike the wetter coastal rainforests to the south.



Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park is an area of high biological diversity. Plants and animals move easily between the interior and coast, and find favorable conditions in the Skagway area due to our relatively dry climate and frequent environmental disturbances. *Disturbances* are events that change the structure of a habitat. In southeast Alaska, disturbances include insect and disease outbreaks, avalanches, landslides, windstorms, and floods - events which allow sunlight to reach the forest floor, encouraging the growth of new plants. Unlike most rainforests, fire is an important disturbance in the Skagway and Taiya river valleys.

The **alpine habitat** occurs at low elevations throughout Southeast Alaska – as low as 2500' (800 m). These treeless areas are characteristic of much higher altitudes in southern latitudes, but are present here as a result of deep snowpack and long winters of the north. Alpine meadows burst with colorful wildflowers during the summer.

The **boreal forest** of the interior shares many plants and animals with the coastal communities, but is both drier than the coastal rainforest and subject to the greater climatic extremes of the continental interior. The forests and wetlands are ideal habitat for moose, caribou, bears, and mosquitoes.

After a disturbance such as fire, different plants and animals repopulate an area, changing the environment as they replace each other. The series of changing plant and animal life on a disturbed site is *succession*. Typical plant succession in this region may occur as colonizers such as fireweed and devil's club take advantage of forest openings and exposure to the sun. Quick-growing trees and shrubs such as alder, birch, pine, and cottonwood soon move in. Slower growing Sitka spruce and hemlock eventually shade out the others, until only the most shade-tolerant hemlock remains. At any point during succession, the pattern of changing plant communities can be interrupted by new disturbances.



Shore Pine (*Pinus contorta*) Generally a tall, straight tree to 25m (80'), but can be short and crooked when growing on windy outcrops. Needles in pairs, often curved, 5cm (2") long, evergreen. Traditional native uses include lumber for homes and splints, pitch for waterproofing, roots twisted as rope. Look for this tree at Yakutania Point, on AB Mountain, or along the Dyea road.



Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) Large tree to 70m (230') tall, 2m (6') diameter. Bark thin, breaking into small scales. Easy to identify by grasping the branch in hand: stiff, sharp needles point out from all sides. Grows on moist but well-drained sites such as floodplains, glacial outwash and hillsides from low to middle elevations. Budding branch tips are a valuable source of Vitamin C.



Hemlock (*Tsuga species*) Both Western and Mountain Hemlock common; up to 60m (200') tall; feathery foliage with rough reddish-brown bark. Seed cones light to deep purple, brown at maturity. Occurs from dry to wet sites; adapted to grow from low to sub-alpine elevations. Western Hemlock is highly shade-tolerant. Branches were considered an excellent bedding material.



Sub-alpine Fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*) Symmetrical, blue-green tree to 35m (115') tall with narrow, spire-shaped crown. Deep purple seed cones 8cm (3") on tops of branches. Usually found at subalpine elevations. The pitch and bark have been used in medicines, the boughs for bedding and floor covering. See this tree from the train or highway in the upper Skagway valley.

Black Cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*) Large tree to 50m (165') tall; old bark deeply furrowed and dark gray. Leaves oval, 10cm (4") long. Grows well on frequently flooded stream banks. Buds curled in sticky, sappy brown husks; sweet fragrance permeates the air in spring and early summer. The gum from the spring buds can be used to waterproof baskets and boxes.



Sitka Mountain Ash (*Sorbus sitchensis*) Small tree 1-4m (3-12') tall with alternate leaves in 7-11 bluish leaflets. Leaves round at tips, serrate at the middle. Red and berry-like fruits consumed by birds. Grows in coniferous forests and streambanks and clearings. This tree is planted as an ornamental in yards all around Skagway.



Paper Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) Medium deciduous tree to 30m (90') tall. White to brown bark peels in papery strips. Oval/round leaves with toothed margins. Occurs in open to dense woods, from low to mid elevations, most often in well-drained areas. Traditionally used for baskets and canoes.



Birch Conk (*Polyporus betulinus*) Fungus growing alone or in groups on living or dead birch trees. Birch Conk is a parasite that produces a crumbly rot that destroys its host. Can be seen year-round. Used by early backcountry travelers as a fire starter and an antibiotic for dressing wounds.





Red-osier Dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) Spreading shrub 1-6m (3-18') tall; stems often bright red, leaves oval with prominent parallel veins. Flowers white to greenish in flat-topped clusters; fruits white. Featured in swamps and streamside forests and thickets; common on disturbed sites. This shrub is an important winter browse for wildlife. Leaves turn red in the fall.



Alder (*Alnus species*) Both tree and shrub-like forms, commonly from 1-5m (15') tall, growing in dense thickets. Leaves with wavy margins and saw-tooth like teeth. Fruits of brownish cones/nutlets to 2cm (1") long. Grows best along streambanks, often in pure stands at low elevations. The wood is considered the best for smoking salmon and other types of fish.



Blueberry (*Vaccinium species*) Spreading, erect shrubs to 2m (6') tall; fruits an edible blue-black berry. Oval shaped leaves on all spp. Occurs in moist coniferous forests, especially in clearings. Wherever they occur, these berries have been eaten and highly regarded by people through the ages. They remain popular in muffins, pies, or as a trail snack.



Common horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) Features hollow stems up to 70cm (30") tall. This plant occurs often on roadsides and cutbanks, from lowlands to alpine areas. Often found in moist to wet forests, meadows, and seepage areas. This plant is high in silica content, and known as one of the "scouring rushes".

Devil's Club (*Oplopanax horridus*) Erect to sprawling shrub, 1-3m (3-9') tall with numerous large yellowish spines on stems and beneath maple-leaf shaped leaves. Berries are bright red, shiny, in showy clusters; not edible by humans. An extremely important medicinal plant in traditional native cultures; tea made from the inner bark is



Highbush Cranberry (*Viburnum edule*) Erect shrub with 3-lobed, sharply toothed leaves, to 3m (9') tall. Fruits in clusters of 2-5, red or orange. Occurs in moist forests and river terraces, from low to middle elevations. Tart, clustered berries are an important food for wildlife, and are enjoyed by many wild food enthusiasts of the central and northern coast regions.



Goat's Beard (*Aruncus dioicus*) A robust perennial that grows 1-2m (3-6') tall. The name refers to the fluffy white flower clusters. Featured on edges of roadsides, forests, and streams at low to middle elevations. Roots are made into tea as a traditional native remedy for stomach pains, colds and coughs.



Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) Perennial herb, to 100cm (40") tall. Seen on dry to moist, well drained, open sites, including meadows, open slopes, roadsides, from low to high elevations. Traditional native uses include a wide variety of medical preparations, including cold, cough, and throat medicines.





Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*) Highly variable color, but most often black to gray with brown rings or spots. The dog-like face and rounded head is often seen bobbing in the tidewaters and rocky shores of Nahku (Long) Bay or Dyea. Graceful swimmers and alert to danger, these playful critters will be watching you!



Killer Whale (*Orcinus orca*) To 9.4m (31'). Black with white or yellow region on undersides; oval, white patch just above and behind eye. Flippers large and paddle-shaped, dorsal fin tall, sometimes bending. Seen fishing in the upper layers of cool coastal seas.



Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) Seen along coasts or in open seas. To 15m (45') long and 32,000 kilos (35 tons); mostly black with sometimes white on the belly. Head and jaw with fleshy knobs or protuberances; paired blowholes; round projection on tip of lower jaw. Long flippers, small dorsal fin on humped back. Balloon-shaped blow; shows tail fluke when diving.



Chum "Dog" Salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*) To 76cm (30"), 8kg (17lbs); spawns August to November.
Pink "Humpback" Salmon (*Oncorhynchus gorbushca*) To 61cm (24"), 1.8kg (4lbs); spawns June to October.
Chinook "King" Salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) To 120cm (48"), 18kg (40lbs); spawns May to July.

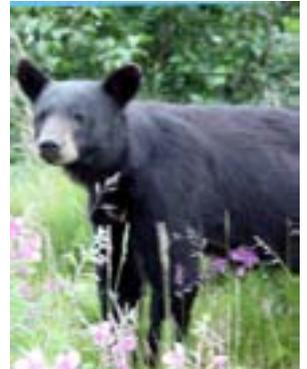
Mountain Goat (*Oreamnos americanus*) Yellowish-white fur, long and shaggy in winter, shorter in summer. "Beard" about 2cm (5") long. Black eyes, hooves, and dagger-like horns. Seen in rocky, mountainous areas above timberline traversing peaks and sheer cliffs.



Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) Rust-red to grayish tree squirrel. Piles of cones or remnants (middens) indicate presence in trees. Abundant in coniferous forests, and active all year. Warning bark sounds mistaken for birdcall. Mushrooms stuck on tree twigs in the autumn are the work of busy red squirrels.



Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) Black to cinnamon, sometimes whitish in color. Snout usually tan, straight profile. Primarily nocturnal, seen early morning/late evening, but can be seen midday. Forages for berries, fishes during salmon spawn. Most often seen near the coast in spring and fall. **Danger! Do not approach wildlife!**



Grizzly Bear (*Ursus arctos*) Known as the "Brown" Bear in coastal areas. Yellowish brown to dark brown, significant hump at shoulders. Facial profile concave; usually larger body size than black bears. Paws with large, straight claws. Omnivorous; feeds on plant material and fish during spawn. Most often seen near the coast in spring and fall. **Danger! Do not approach wildlife!**





Chestnut-backed Chickadee (*Parus rufescens*) L 10cm (4") Sooty-brown cap, white cheeks, black bib; back and rump chestnut. Found in coniferous forests; call a hoarse *tseek-a-dee-dee*. This bird is one of only a few year-round resident songbirds in Skagway.



Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) L 22cm (9") Male has gray-blue nape and back, orange eyebrow and wing bars; underparts orange with black breast band. Female with dusky breast band and unmarked throat. Common in dense coniferous forests. Call a soft *took*. Song a series of variously pitched notes rapidly trilled.



Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) L 12cm (5") Highly variable. Streaked with yellow or whitish; pale crown stripe. Short, notched tail. Common in open marshes and grasslands. Song with *chip* notes and two trills; flight call a *seep*. Listen for this bird in spring and summer in the grassy meadows of Dyea.



Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) L 88cm (35") W 200cm (80") Adults with white head and tail, yellow bill. Dark brown with more white toward maturity. Flat-winged soar; feed mainly on fish; nest in tall trees beside bodies of water. Some Bald Eagles nest near Skagway and are seen above the harbor or along the river. Many eagles visit the Taiya River in Oct and Nov to feed on salmon.

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) L 60cm (24") Large black bird with long heavy bill and wedge-shaped tail. Call a low, drawn-out croak. Found in all habitats. Usually solitary or in small groups, this scavenger is known for its intelligence. In native cultures, the Raven is often the center of stories and jokes about cunning trickery.



Northwestern Crow (*Corvus caurinus*) L 40cm (16") Black bird which inhabits coastal areas and islands, where it is a scavenger. Hoarse, low call. The crow can be distinguished from Ravens by its smaller size, flat-edged fan-shaped tail, smaller bill, and tendency to gather in large groups.



Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) L 27cm (11") Blue overall, black crest, throat, breast. Calls include harsh *shaack shaack shaack*. Common in coniferous forests. Bold and aggressive; scavenger. Many Steller's Jays make nest in the larger trees of Skagway's town lots.



Gull species (*Larus*)
Mew (*canus*) L 42cm (17") W 107cm (43") Adult has gray head, brown in winter; dark eyes. Wings characteristically tipped black and white.

Glaucus (*hyperboreus*) L 67cm (27") W 150cm (60") Adult has pale gray wings, yellow eyes. Wing tips translucent. Shown at right.

Watch for gulls over the open water and resting on the intertidal shores in Dyea.



Wild Klondike highlights 35 of the most common plants and animals found in Alaska's Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park.

Klondike Gold Rush NHP is located in Skagway, Alaska at the northernmost end of the Inside Passage. Species discussed here occur in various locations in and around the National Park.

The production of this brochure was coordinated by the National Park Service, Klondike Gold Rush NHP, with the intent to protect the natural resources in a manner that ensures perpetuation of natural succession and recovery compatible with the historic scene.

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Cover photographs: Scenes are taken from various habitats around the Skagway region. The Coastal Rainforest is on the lower Chilkoot Trail in the Taiya River Valley; the Alpine Tundra is near the Chilkoot Summit; the Boreal Forest is at Lake Lindeman on the Chilkoot Trail.

The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

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