

Conifer in Focus – Eastern Redcedar

Juniperus virginiana L. var. *virginiana*
Eastern redcedar

How to recognize this common conifer: Thin, shreddy bark; evergreen scale-like leaves; female cones that look like waxy blue berries. Don't confuse it with *Chamaecyparis thyoides* (Atlantic white cedar) or *Thuja occidentalis* (American arborvitae), which have fan-like sprays of leaves and are less common in the wild. *Juniperus communis* (common juniper), widely planted in landscapes, is a northern species, now extirpated in Maryland.

The Eastern redcedar, a pioneer in open areas, is a favorite of birds as the photos on this page and the cover show. Many different animal species feast on the small blue cones and use this small evergreen tree for cover. Very likely, the trees in our photos sprang from seeds "planted" by birds. Research on the cedar waxwing shows that it takes only about 12 minutes for redcedar seeds to pass through the birds' guts, and seeds that have been consumed by this bird have levels of germination roughly three times higher than seeds from uneaten cones. Birds often digest their food while sitting on fences, resulting in redcedar rows that faithfully follow fencelines.

Redcedar is often one of the first trees to repopulate old fields and other cleared, abandoned land. It thrives under a variety of adverse conditions, including drought and cold, and grows well in substrates from rocky to sandy to clay. Landscapers appreciate redcedar's ability to grow in tightly spaced rows, as competition between the trees is minimal. Thus, it can be used to create a solid wall or windbreak in a relatively short time. Like other pioneer species, redcedar does not tolerate fire, and historically its abundance was likely kept in check by fire. With wildfires now being suppressed, redcedar can become an invasive nuisance in grasslands, and especially in pasturelands where it outcompetes forage species. In one respect redcedar is unusual among pioneer species. It can be extremely long lived. Specimens in West Virginia and Missouri have been reported to range from 700 to over 900 years old.

Variety *virginiana* is native from Maine south to Georgia, and west into the plains states. Variety *silicicola* is native to the coastal plain from North Carolina, south into central Florida, and along the Gulf coast into eastern Texas.



Eastern redcedar in Talbot County. Photo by Dan Small.

~ Kirsten Johnson



Fish crow perched in a redcedar. Photo by Jim Stasz.



Yellow-rumped (myrtle) warbler eating redcedar cones. Photo by Bonnie Ott.