

What to look for outdoors in Autumn

Two kinds of Birch Catkins

What you need:



Have a magnifying glass in your pocket.

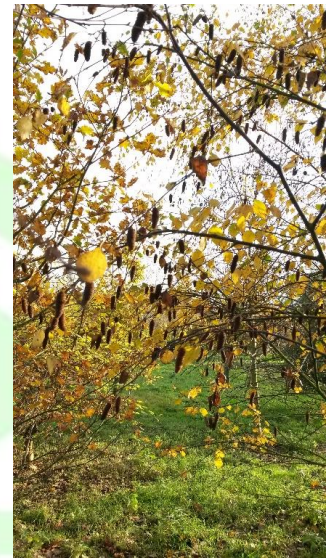
First, look for a **Silver Birch Tree**.

The silver (white, really) bark is a give-away clue.

Feel how smooth the white bark is and how rough the black bark is at the bottom of the trunk.



Also, silver birches have fine floppy fronds dangling from their branches. The fronds sway in the breeze. Some are crimson.



A birch tree with masses of dry catkins



Birch leaves

Silver birches have diamond-shaped leaves, green then gold in autumn – or your tree might have no leaves at all by now.



Dry birch catkins

See if your silver birch has some dry catkins. These are brown on the outside, crispy and dry. Perhaps your birch has some catkins that are no more than a needle-thin spike with a few rings around it. The rest of the catkin has blown away. You can still pick what is there.

We are going to squidge the catkin into your hand.

Questions



What do you think the catkin will be made of?



Clue: trees make fruits or seeds in autumn.

However, you will see that there are two different little shapes in your hand.



Which shape do you think is the seed? The tiny yellow speck with transparent wings on either side? Or the light-brown, bird-shaped pieces?



Birch catkin pieces

Yes, you are right, the yellow speck is the seed and the transparent wings are to carry it away in the wind to where it can take root and grow into a new birch tree.

Pretend to be the wind and blow the pieces in your hand. See how they scatter away from you.

Do



Get out your magnifying glass and have another look at those seeds and their transparent wings.

Questions

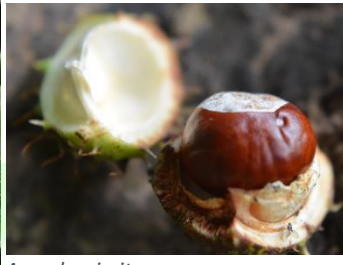


Would you say the seeds are small?

Think of other tree seeds you know.



A pair of acorns



A conker in its case

Acorns and conkers are much, much bigger than the tiny yellow specks that were in your hand. I think it is amazing that a birch tree could grow from such a tiny thing as a birch seed.



A birch seed



But what are the light-brown, bird-shaped pieces doing in the catkin?

They hold the hundreds of seeds together neatly.

Can you make yourself into the shape of a seed holder? Do you feel like a bird? Or like an aeroplane? Try curving your arms inwards a little and imagine holding giant seeds under your arms.



Two kinds of birch catkins



Were there any other catkins on your silver birch tree?

If so, they might look like the ones at the bottom of this photo: smaller, greener and harder than the dry ones.



Do you think the green catkins will stay the same colour through the winter? Do you think that by next autumn they will have become the catkins that are now dry and full of seeds?



It is fun to make notes and drawings of what you saw and did today and what you think it might be worth looking for next.

There is more to the silver birch catkin story than you might think!



For more about birch trees, what came before and what comes next, see Hello Trees book *Betty Birch* and our other Resource Sheets at <http://hellotrees.co.uk/>

