Finder Books

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- Skills and guides - Library -

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Description:
Quick dichotomous keys for trees, plants, and animals.
There are a host of Finder booklets, essentially pocket-sized, easy dichotomous keys or sketch guides that allow quick and efficient identification of trees, berries, ferns, flowers, weeds, tracks, birds, fish, invertebrates, and mammals. I have several of these booklets and while I have not used the bird, fish or fern versions, find the ones I have used to be straightforward little gems.

Various “Finder” Books

First a simple list of titles:

**US and Canada East of the Rockies**

*Tree Finder*

*Flower Finder*

*Winter Tree Finder*

*Fern Finder*

*Track Finder*

*Berry Finder*

*Life on the Intertidal Rocks*
My most used Finder guides are the various Tree finders. These are about the simplest in the series to use as they are pure dichotomous keys. Very simple icons are used to sort and direct you to the proper starting place in the guide. For instance this example from Tree Finder by May Theilgaard Watts (the Eastern US and Canada Finder):

If the tree has needles start with this symbol [a conical pine type symbol] on this page

If the tree has leaves start with this symbol [a rounded deciduous tree type symbol] on page 14
A dichotomous key works by presenting 2 choices...easily determined choices in the case of these booklets...here are the basic questions presented:

needles or leaves;

long needles or short scale like;

bundles or single;

bundles of 2 to 5 or deciduous, many in a tuft

if branchlets are drooping and cones are about 1 inch long...it is European Larch *Larix decidua*

if branchlets are not drooping and the cones are about ½ inch long....it is American Larch or Tamarack *Larix laricina*

As you can see from the outline above this Tree Finder guide asks easily determined questions and leads directly to the tree, in this example, a Larch. If, for instance, the needles would have been scale like rather than long, the key would have directed you to page 13 and presented choices of 3 cedar trees.

It is important to use a tree finder for your area however. If we followed the above example in the *Rocky Mountain Tree Finder* or the *Pacific Coast Tree Finder*, again to the Larch trees the choices would have been:

If the needles are three-sided, it is a Western Larch *Larix occidentalis*

If they're four-sided, it is Subalpine Larch *Larix lyallii*

So it is very important to use the proper finder, and make full use of the geographic distribution drawings.

These tree guides include scale color drawings of the key attributes of tree leaves which are clear and greatly assist with the questions. Very little technical understanding is required to use these guides. Many of the professional tree keys require a fairly good understanding of tree morphology to answer their questions. These little guides do not take that approach and are of course, more limited in their application to the more common species.

I am most familiar with, and use the most, my *Pacific Coast Tree Finder* and *Rocky Mountain Tree Finder* both by Tom Watts, however, all the tree Finders are much like the example above. The *Winter Tree Finder* does require a bit more tree morphology understanding than the tree finders using leaves, but again a clear drawing defines these important characteristics and the key uses for the most part, easily found marks. Unfortunately, this guide is for the Eastern US and Canada only, but I have found it useful for some non-native trees on the West Coast.

The various other Finder booklets for mammals, birds, fish and invertebrates use line sketches of the animal, tracks, scat, habitat, and their skulls along with a short paragraph of information for identification. The mammal guides make interesting and fun use of a dichotomous key for animal sign like nests, burrows, mounds, and depressions as well as, chew, scratch browse and other signs. These along with animal silhouette, scat and track sorting pages makes full use of the diverse set of identifying marks animals make compared to the tree books. The *Pacific Coast Bird* finder, really is not a dichotomous key, but uses habitat to sort out 61 common birds from their line sketches. This
booklet really cannot replace a bird book like Peterson or Sibley, but certainly can be fun for casual birders and especially kids. The *Pacific Intertidal Life* finder uses a body shape key and habitat zones to point you to the correct plant or animal class, and line drawings and descriptions to finalize your choice.

"Pacific Coast Bird" and "Pacific Coast Tree" Finder Internal Views

One or two of these books added to a daypack can greatly expand the enjoyment of a day in the woods or a walk on the beach. These are a great addition to a walk in the woods with kids. Even if you are quite familiar with your forest fauna, working through tree identification or determining what animal left that sign can provide hours of quality and instructive time with your kids.

Each of these booklets cost $3.50 to $3.75. Well worth picking up and dropping in your field bag along with your binoculars, water bottle, notebook and lunch sack.

Post-scriptum:

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Version 1.5 1/30/2006 with images