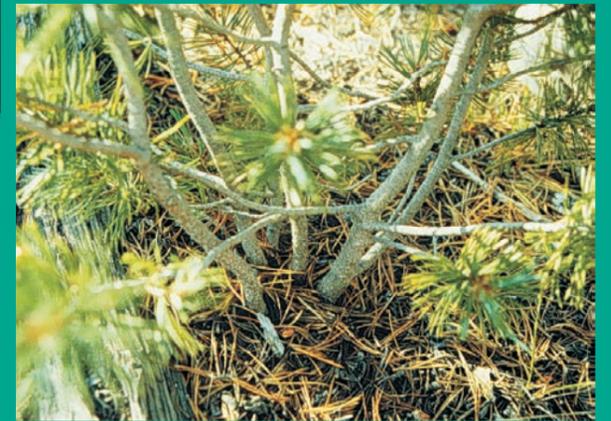




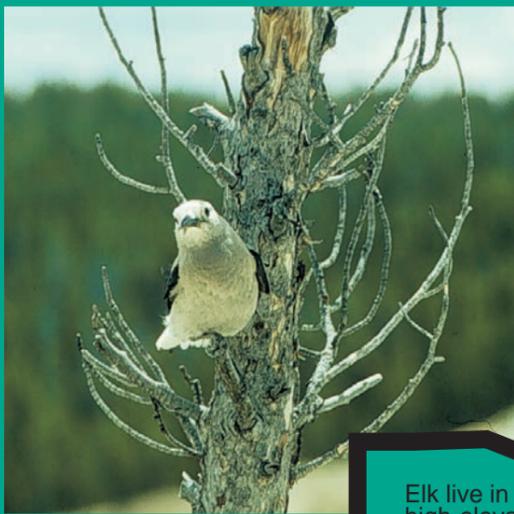
At high elevations, trees and other plants often grow in clusters. Fire spread depends on the plant cover. Where plants are sparse, fires burn only in patches. Where subalpine firs are tall and their branches are dense, fire can climb up into the crowns of large pine trees.



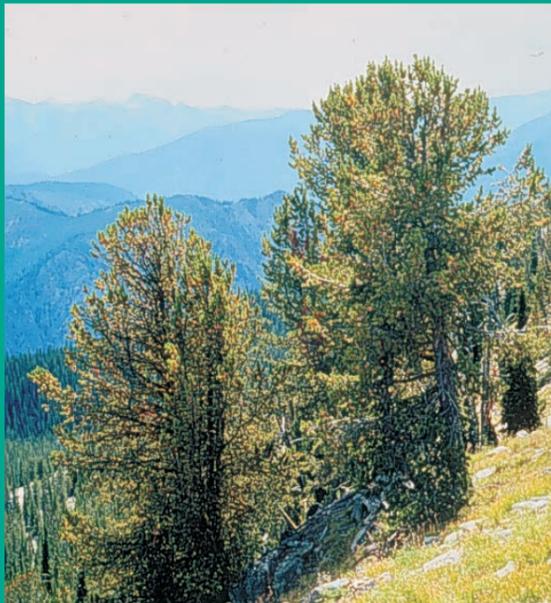
Summers are cool and short in high-elevation forests. Fires do not occur often. When a fire does come through, it may kill only the smaller trees. It often damages the thin bark of the pines that live at high elevations, leaving scars like these.



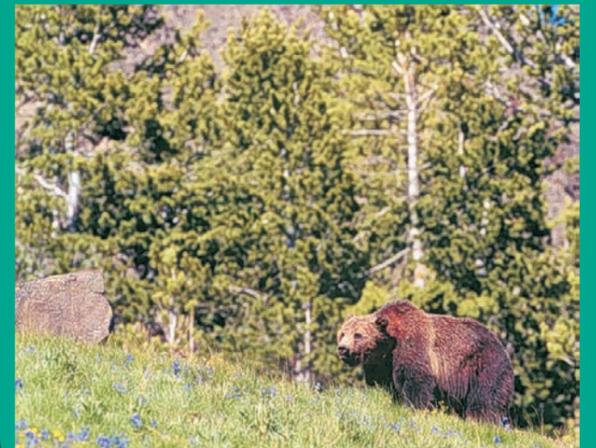
Pine seedlings grow in clusters from seed caches left by Clark's Nutcrackers. If they get enough sun and moisture, and if they can resist the rust fungus that kills 5-needled pines, they will grow a new forest high in the mountains.



Every summer, the Clark's Nutcracker harvests thousands of fatty seeds from pine cones. It buries the seeds so it can find and eat them year-round. Some seeds are never found. They can grow up into clusters of new trees.



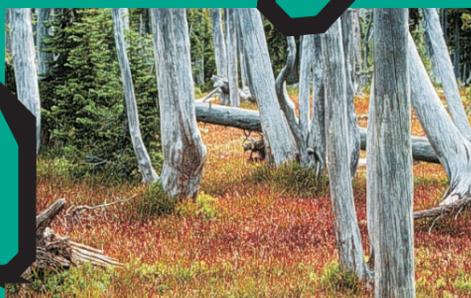
Whitebark pine



Grizzly bears are almost always searching for food. If they find a squirrel's cache of pine cones, they have a feast. The white, fatty seeds of high elevation pines are one of their favorite foods in late summer and fall.

Elk live in high-elevation meadows and forests during the summer. The flies are not as thick here as they are below. While plants in lower forests are already brown and dry, the plants here are still green and fresh. Elk like to wallow in wet, muddy spots in high mountain basins.

Birds, squirrels, and bears eat these nutritious seeds from pine trees. Native Americans used to travel high into the mountains to harvest them each year.

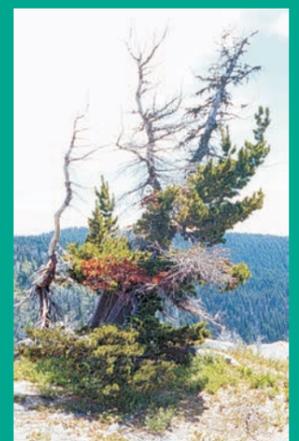


Smooth woodrush is a grass-like plant living in high-elevation forests. In the fall, woodrush leaves form a rust-colored carpet on the forest floor.

Although fire can kill the leaves of smooth woodrush, it grows back from deep roots the following year.



Subalpine fir grows well at high elevations, in both sun and shade. Where pines cannot grow well because of shade, and where they cannot produce seed because fungus has killed their high branches, these firs will become the next forest.



White pine blister rust is a fungus that was accidentally brought to North America from Europe. It came to the Rocky Mountains about 1920. Blister rust kills 5-needled pines by girdling the stem. In older trees, it kills the tops, where needles and cones are found. It has killed about 96 percent of the 5-needled pines in Montana and Idaho.