

Aspen



Aspen trees play a unique and vital role in the ecosystem in the Northern Rocky Mountains, attracting many birds, insects and mammals. In the past decades aspen groves in the area have been on a decline. Forest management can enhance new growth in the remaining groves, by removing encroaching conifer trees and eventually reintroducing fire to stimulate new growth.

A grove of aspen contain an intertwined underground root system that is called a clone. When aspen are distressed, a hormonal imbalance occurs in the root clone which causes sprouting of the tree. Often tens of thousands shoots per acre will sprout. It's a good thing that so many shoots are formed because browsing animals love aspen and are preferred forage in the winter months by big game.

It is estimated that Montana has lost 64% of its aspen trees. One culprit is the lack of fire. Fire suppression has allowed conifers to spread into aspen groves where they shade the aspen and rob the aspen of moisture. Since aspen need an abundance of sunlight and moisture, they begin to decline. As the above ground aspen decline in health so does the vigor of the clone and this creates a cascade effect in the tree's decline. As the clone becomes weaker the sprouts are fewer and browsing animals have more of a negative effect on the tree.

