



Windows Into the Past

In the Apostle Islands, it is possible to walk through forests that provide a glimpse of what northern Wisconsin used to be. Some of the islands have old-growth forest, others mature forest – but it’s not just the trees that makes them unique. The understory is thick and full of Canada yew, providing important habitat to birds and other species. This plant “community” is still found on Sand, York, Raspberry, Devils, North Twin, Outer and Eagle Islands, which have historically supported few, if any, deer. This “community” was once common, but has become extremely scarce elsewhere in the upper Midwest due to over-browsing by white-tailed deer. The plant communities on these islands are invaluable for research, providing a living baseline for understanding the impacts deer are having in other places.



Unbrowsed forest on Outer Island



Healthy Canada yew



Heavily browsed Canada yew

“Deer Candy”

Canada yew (*Taxus canadensis*) is an evergreen shrub that is highly preferred by deer for food. This “deer candy” will be eaten before other deer favorites, such as cedar and hemlock. Yew is nearly impossible to find on the mainland where deer have eaten virtually every plant. Rocky Island, and several other Apostle Islands, quickly lost their stands of Canada yew when deer numbers exploded in the 1950’s. More recently, a similar deer population explosion occurred on Sand and York Islands in the early 2000’s, causing a rapid decline in Canada yew. Deer numbers have been reduced and there’s signs of recovery. However, recovery is very slow. It is estimated that the yew on Rocky Island won’t fully recover for nearly 100 years. Hopefully the deer numbers were reduced soon enough on Sand and York to allow for a much more rapid recovery.