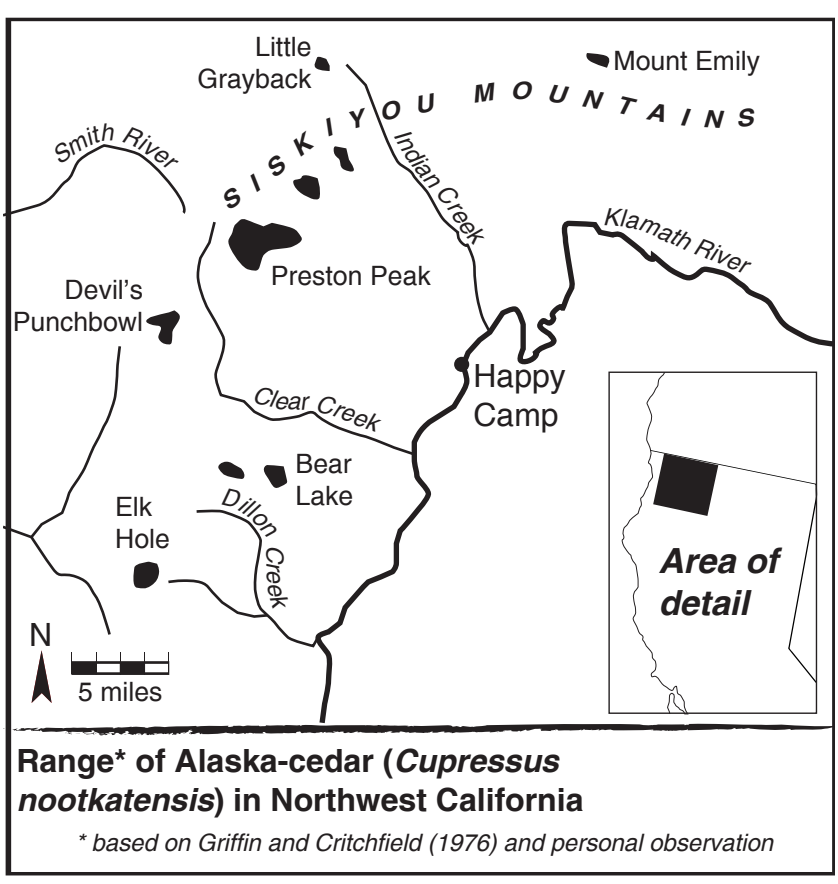
Alaska-cedar | *Callitropsis nootkatensis* | Also called Alaska yellow-cedar or yellow cypress

This common tree of the Alaska coast south to northern Oregon is represented by a few, small, isolated groves in California—only in the Siskiyou Mountains (Map 7). The Alaska-cedar has a unique range in the Cascades and Siskiyous. Over most of Alaska and Canada it is a coastal mountain tree, but in Washington and Oregon it lives in cool, wet, rocky, north-facing glades in subalpine conditions which see heavy winter snowpack. This is also the case in northern California where it is a true relict, surviving in only a handful of places. Alaska-cedars rarely get very big in the Siskiyou, topping out at around 40 feet tall. Although lacking size, these southern stands still maintain healthy populations. On specific sites it forms impenetrable, low-growing thickets along entire rocky washes between subalpine lakes—an adventurous soul will find such places on hikes 7 and 8.

While the other "cedars" in northwest California that overlap in habitat have leaf structure that can be described as lacy (the Port Orford-cedar) or flattened and vertical (incense-cedar) when one finds the Alaska yellow-cedar it is droopy. It looks wet and tired, yet beautiful. While Port Orford-cedar has stomatal bloom in the shape of an X, Alaska-cedar has none. The circular cones are similar to those of the Port Orford, but Alaska-cedar has fewer than 6 cone scales while Port Orford-cedar has more than 6. The unopened cone looks like an armored ball because the end of each scale is sharply tipped—and most of the year the cones do remain closed, like the cypresses. Though cone production does not occur every year, one may find remnants on the ground from previous years. The bark is similar to that of the other cedars but generally is thinner. Only the juvenile bark characteristics are important—grey to brown to rarely black between scaly or shallow ridges—because it doesn't get very old here. In the Siskiyou Mountains these three "cedars" all occur, sometimes together, making identification challenging. The real challenge lies in finding the rare Alaska-cedar.

It was thought that the Alaska-cedar was a very close relative of the Port Orford-cedar—supporting the theory that the Port Orford-cedar may a neoendemic to the region. The two species were formerly place together in the genus *Chamaecyparis*. But, a newly discovered species only in northern Vietnam called the Vietnamese golden cypress (*Callitropsis vietnamensis*) put an end to that theory in 2002. Cladistic analysis using morphological characters placed Alaska-cedar in close relation to the Vietnam cypress (Farjon 2008). Farjon has gone on to propose that because of these genetic similarities as well as the similarities in the heartwood, they be placed in a new genus *Xanthocyparis*. Based on the discovery, Little (2006) suggests several scenarios for reclassification including a grouping of all *Cupressus* and *Chamaecypris* into the new genus *Callitropsis*. This is yet one of several classification schemes for plants formerly in the genus *Cupressus*.

The Alaska-cedar has been placed in one of four genera: *Cupressus, Chamaecypris*, *Xanthocyparis*, and the one I am using *Callitropsis*. What has transpired, for now, is the New World cypresses, the Alaska-cedar, and Vietnam cypress were placed in a new genus—*Callitropsis*—while *Chamaecyparis* (Port Orford-cedar) was left alone. Morphologically, this is quite correct. But, ecologically, the cypresses could not be more distinct from the Alaska-cedar. The Siskiyou Mountains are the only place in North America that these overlap—where the Siskiyou cypress reaches the northern extent of any cypress and the Alaska-cedar reaches its southern extent. I feel there is surely more reclassification to come within the family Cupressaceae. Interestingly, and lending to a close genetic relationship, the popular ornamental, Leyland Cypress, is a hybrid of the Monterrey Cypress and the Alaska-cedar (Adams *et. al*. 2006a).



Range* of Alaska-cedar (*Cupressus nootkatensis*) in Northwest California

** based on Griffin and Critchfield (1976) and personal observation*

Alaska yellow-cedar — *Callitropsis nootkatensis*

ABOVE: cones resemble small, armoured balls.

RIGHT: dangling from a cliff above Lower Bear Lake

BELOW: bark is shaggy and sometimes black and red

ABOVE: needles are distinct in that they lack stomatal bloom and cones have fewer than 6 scales

Bark: thin, grey to brown outside, reddish inside to rarely black between scaly or shallow ridges, a cut into the bark will reveal a smell like potato **Needles**: only to 1/8 inch long, scale-like, somewhat prickly, without white stomatal bloom on underside of needles; droopy and tired- similar to hemlocks **Cones**: Round, green when closed, brown when dried and open, with spike or horn at end of each scale, 4-6 scales per cone, 2 cm diameter, mature in two seasons, slightly larger and less wrinkled than POC **Habitat**: Only in the Siskiyou Mountains in a few rocky, north-facing cirques above 5000 feet.