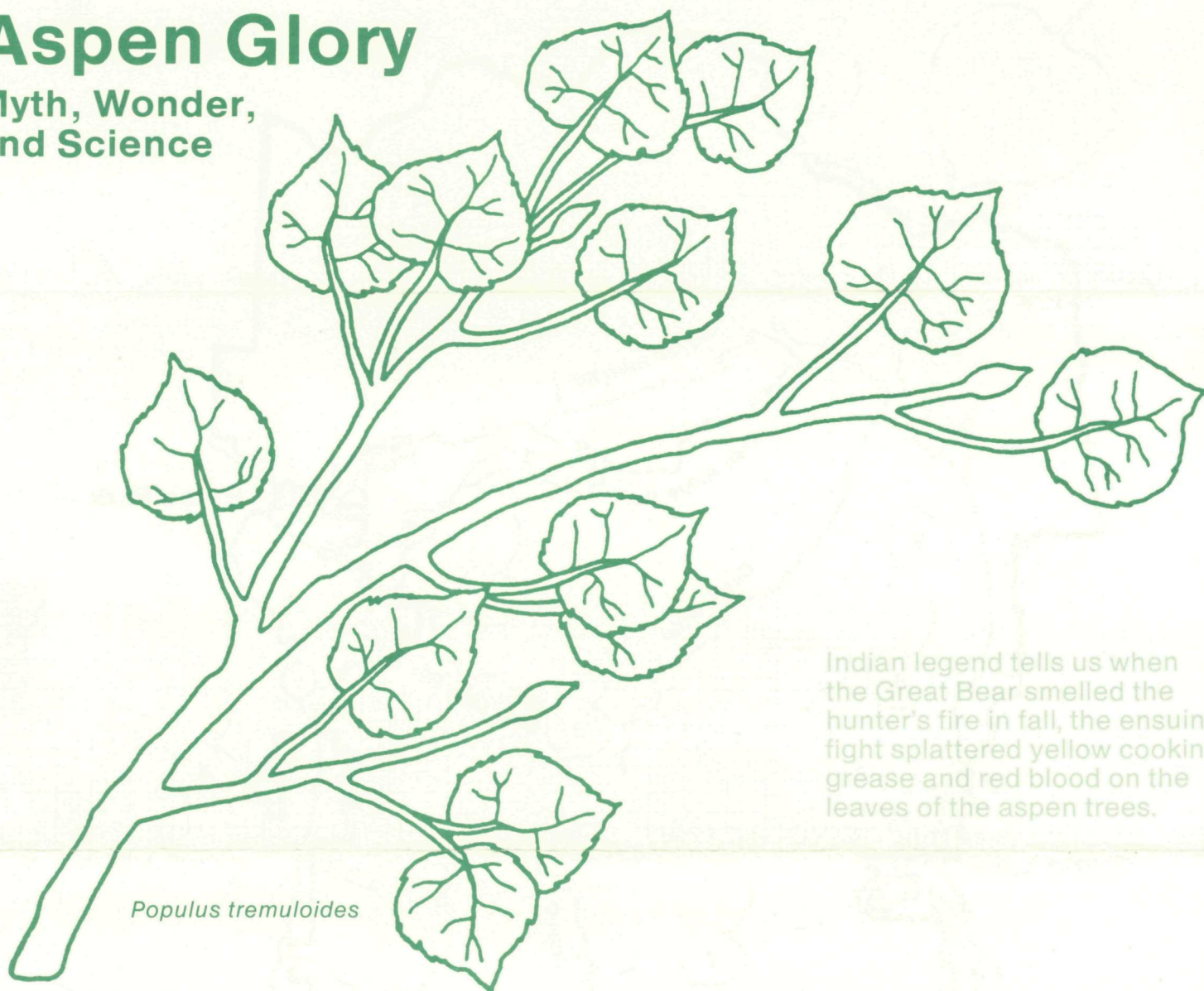


Aspen Glory

Myth, Wonder,
and Science



Populus tremuloides

Indian legend tells us when the Great Bear smelled the hunter's fire in fall, the ensuing fight splattered yellow cooking grease and red blood on the leaves of the aspen trees.

The quaking aspen and its trembling leaves are still a source of wonder. The key to their fall hues lies not in the human world, but in the natural environment.

The color changes start first in the subalpine zone (9,000 - 11,000 feet elevation) in early September. Progressively, changes reach the montane zone (8,000 - 9,500 feet) by mid-month. Weather can dictate a good or poor year for color, and the fall display can last as long as four weeks.

Patches of similar color are seen which indicate a 'clone' of trees -- trees growing from the same root system. These genetically identical trees will be the same shade of yellow, red, or gold and will change at the same time.

WHY THE VIVID COLORS?

The Indians answered their questioning with an enduring tale. The scientific explanation is based on different truths. Variations in temperature, moisture, and light set the internal chemical changes in motion.

A close examination of the aspen buds in springtime reveals many hues hidden within the leaves. As the foliage matures, chlorophyll, the green pigment, carries on photosynthesis, converting sunshine into food and energy. In doing so, the chlorophyll dominates all other colors.

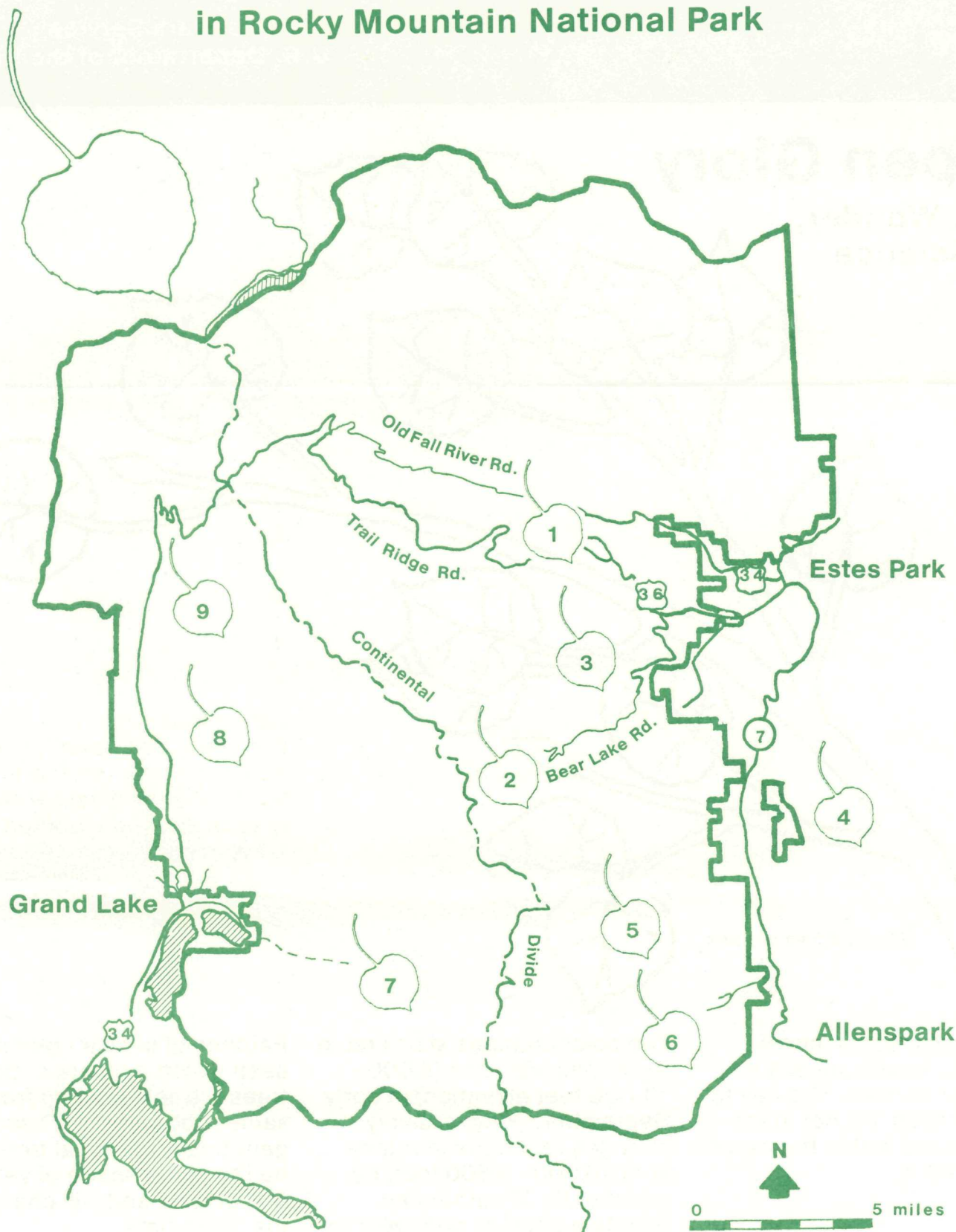
The diminished light and temperature of fall trigger the break down of chlorophyll. As the green colors fade, yellow, orange, and red pigments -- carotenoids and xanthophylls -- are unmasked.

The radiant red to nearly blue color is produced by anthocyanin. This pigment appears when sugars are concentrated in the leaves.

Ideal conditions of sunny days and cool nights produce the choicest spectrum.

Suggested Aspen Viewing Areas

in Rocky Mountain National Park



1 HIDDEN VALLEY - Aspens dominate the southeast facing hillside on Highway 34 (7 miles from Park Headquarters), just west of the Beaver Ponds Boardwalk.

2 BEAR LAKE ROAD - This is a very popular location for viewing color. Alberta Falls is a 1.2 mile round-trip hike abounding with fall sights and scents.

3 FERN & CUB LAKE TRAILS - These trails in Moraine Park off the Bear Lake Road provide easy hiking and aspen viewing.

4 TWIN SISTERS - See the "Butterfly Burn" on the west slope of the peak 7 miles south of Estes Park on Colorado Hwy. 7.

5 LONGS PEAK - Travel south 8 miles on Colorado Hwy. 7, to see fall colors on the lower flanks of the peak.

6 WILD BASIN - Drive to the Finch Lake Trailhead and hike for a distance of 1½ miles one-way into the aspen forest.

7 EAST INLET TRAIL - A 3 mile one-way hike on this trail leads to spectacular fall color.

8 KAWUNEECHE VALLEY - Drive through more than ten miles of prime aspen country along Trail Ridge Road. Start at Grand Lake and travel to just beyond the Timber Lake Trailhead.

9 FARVIEW CURVE - At 10,000 feet elevation, this overlook provides a good panorama of the Kawuneeche Valley and the Never Summer Range.