

# Bald Cypress

*Taxodium distichum*



TPWD PHOTO



Bald cypress trees add grace and beauty to many of Texas' most cherished waterways. A member of the Redwood family, they are among the first trees in Texas to lose their leaves in the fall (hence the name "*bald* cypress") and the last to bud in the spring.

*Northern Pineywoods*

# Bald Cypress

*Taxodium distichum*



## APPEARANCE

**Height:** Up to 120 feet (15.2 to 36.6m)

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Needle-like leaves grow individually from the twig.
- Leaves are soft and feathery in appearance.
- Dull light green above, whitish underneath
- Cone-shaped "knees" project from submerged roots.
- Is a *deciduous* (loses its leaves in fall) *conifer* (cone bearing tree)
- Brown or gray bark with long fiber-like or scaly ridges that peel off in strips
- Cones are made up of several four-angled, flattened scales.
- Limbs are often draped with Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*).

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** Eastern states and west as far as central Texas

**Flowers:** Flower buds appear in late December or early January and bloom in March and April. Pollen is shed, or released, when the flowers bloom.

**Fruit:** Seeds are produced inside the female cone. The cones ripen from October to December, changing from green to brownish purple, before dropping from parent tree.

**Seeds:** Cones can contain anywhere from two to 34 seeds, but generally average 16. Sprouts can form from the cut trunk of bald cypress trees as old as 60 years.

**Life span:** Most live up to 600 years, but some individuals have survived 1,200 years.

## HABITAT

Bald cypress are most abundant in wet, swampy soils of floodplain lakes and along *riparian* (streamside) corridors.

## BALD CYPRESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- Wild turkey, wood ducks, evening grosbeak and squirrels eat the seeds.
- Branches provide nesting places for bald eagles and osprey.
- Rotting knees are used as nesting cavities by warblers.
- Catfish spawn beneath cypress logs.
- Bald cypress diffuse and slow floodwaters, reducing flood damage. They also trap sediments and pollutants.

## BALD CYPRESS AND PEOPLE

The bald cypress is known by other names in parts of its range – Gulf cypress, red cypress, southern cypress, swamp cypress, white cypress and yellow cypress. *Taxodium* is Greek for "yew-like," which refers to a family of generally small trees prized for hard wood. The species name, *distichum*, means "two-ranked" and refers to the two rows in which the leaves grow. Cypress is also called the "wood eternal" because the heartwood is resistant to decay. Bald cypress is used for heavy construction, including docks, warehouses, boats and bridges, and was heavily logged in much of Texas.

The Choctaw Indians used the bark for string and rope. The Seminoles found bald cypress useful for making houses, canoes, and ceremonial objects.