

Cottonwood

Kansas State Tree



Facts about the Cottonwood

- The Kansas Legislature designated Cottonwood as the State Tree in 1937, calling it the “pioneer tree of the prairie.” It is also known as Eastern Cottonwood, Common Cottonwood, and Plains Cottonwood.
- The Cottonwood’s scientific name is *Populus deltoides*. The genus *Populus* comes from the Latin “populous” meaning “the people.” The species *deltoides* comes from the Greek “delt,” for the letter delta, and “oid,” meaning “like or form” – referring to the triangular shape of the leaves. A member of the Willow family, Cottonwoods share kinship with Willows, Poplars and Aspens.
- Cottonwoods are native to every Kansas county, preferring the moist banks of lakes, rivers, and streams; however, it will grow in drier conditions.
- Cottonwoods grow quickly and may reach over 80 feet tall in ideal conditions. The largest known Cottonwood in Kansas grows near Studley, Kansas in Sheridan County. In 2008, it was 97 feet tall with a spread of 157 feet and a trunk circumference of 35 feet.
- Cottonwood Trees are either male or female. The males produce the pollen which fertilizes the female flowers. Only the females produce the “cottony” seeds.
- The tiny fluff-covered seeds of the Cottonwood float through the air for miles, carried by the wind.

Animal Uses of the Cottonwood

- Because of its relatively soft wood, many woodpeckers make their homes in Cottonwoods, including downy, hairy, red-headed, red-bellied, northern flicker, and the pileated woodpecker.
- Secondary cavity nesting birds inherit these abandoned woodpecker holes, including the eastern bluebird, black-capped chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, and tufted titmouse. Screech owls and kestrels also nest in larger woodpecker holes.
- Cottonwoods may lose limbs, creating an opening which may be used by barred owls and wood ducks and mammals such as squirrels, raccoons and opossums.
- Over 360 species of butterfly and moth caterpillars feed on the leaves of the Cottonwood, including the Viceroy, Mourning Cloak, and Red-spotted Purple butterflies. One of our largest Kansas beetles, the Cottonwood Borer, also depends on Cottonwoods as its food source.
- Many song birds feast on the insects that call the Cottonwood home. Baltimore orioles prefer nesting in the Cottonwood and weave a long sock-like nest from Cottonwood fiber.

Human Uses of the Cottonwood

- Historically, Native Americans ate the sweet inner bark and fed the young twigs to their horses. Cottonwoods, a “sacred tree of life,” were used to construct prayer sticks and ceremonial drums.
- Early settlers constructed buildings using the light-weight wood and fashioned light, easily portaged canoes by burning and hollowing out large trunks. The modern freight industry uses shipping crates and pallet boxes made from Cottonwood.
- Cottonwood’s fast growth and spreading habit make it an excellent shade tree.
- Cottonwood trees are grown in large plantations for their pulp, which makes the finest paper for stationary and hard-bound books.