

Taiga junior

Between the hardwood forests and the tundra lies the taiga, or coniferous forest, that extends from northern Europe to Siberia and Canada, occupying the northern part of the world. Here the climate is rather severe in winter (it can reach -30°C) and cool in summer (temperatures do not exceed 20°C). In the Northern Hemisphere, the taiga forms an uninterrupted belt around the world, from Scandinavia to the Asian Siberia and Canada. The taiga constitutes the biggest uninterrupted woodland area in the world and occupies 8% of the land surface.

Total precipitation is not high, on average around 400-600 mm, but is even less in the extreme north, at times just about 150 mm, like in many deserts.

In southern Europe, coniferous forests are present at altitudes from 1500 and 2000 metres, and in many aspects are similar to the taiga of the northern plains. Few trees are found in this ecosystem, mainly fir, pine, birch and a smaller number of larch, willow, alder and poplar. Only where the sun's rays manage to penetrate are there bushes with succulent fruits such as gooseberries, raspberries and blueberries.

Among the mammals that inhabit the taiga there are foxes, lynx, bears, minks and squirrels; among the larger mammals there are grey wolves and their prey: the caribou, the reindeer and the moose. In winter the wolves hunt these herbivores in packs, often splitting into two groups to surround their prey before attacking. At times one group creates confusion within the prey's herd, while the other creeps in among it stealthily. Only the young, injured or old members are captured, the adults are spared. During the harsh winter, many of these mammals live in the forest, under cover of the vegetation. The species that do not hibernate possess particular adaptations to move deftly on the snow. Reindeer and moose, for example, have broad, flat hooves so that their weight is distributed on a wider area and they do not sink into the snow, just like the snowshoes we wear in the mountains. Feet with similar adaptations can be found in the arctic hare, the lynx and the grouse. The American beaver is a mammal that lives near watercourses where deciduous trees (i.e. those that shed their leaves seasonally) grow, such as poplars, birches and willows. Beavers are very interesting animals from an ecological point of view because they can bring about substantial changes in forest vegetation. In fact, they feed on the bark of some species of trees, often causing their death, and cut down other trees to build their lodges and dams on the rivers. The entrance to the lodge is always underwater, while the den is situated where it is dry. The diameter of the lodge can reach 1 metre and its height 40-50 centimetres. The ability of the beaver is not restricted to the construction of lodges and dens, but also regards the building of canals that allow it to reach its feeding areas under cover. This rodent accumulates wood inside its lodge to sustain it during the winter. Even when the water freezes, beavers live inside their lodge protected from predators such as the wolverine, a rather large predator capable of climbing up and then suddenly dropping down on its victim as it passes by.