Conifer Nursery

What caused this part of the Nature Trail to become a nursery for several varieties of conifers? Probably the biggest change in the micro-environment of the forest was the sudden availability of sunlight. Most of the local conifer seedlings cannot grow without adequate sun. Somewhere nearby a tree fell, possibly blown down in a high wind. This opened the canopy and allowed sunlight to penetrate to the forest floor, and suddenly seeds of Douglas fir, Grand fir, Sitka spruce, hemlock and Western red cedar burst into growth.

Obviously, this many young trees cannot reach maturity in such dense conditions. Left alone, Nature will thin them out. Those that grow the fastest will crowd out their slower neighbors. Those that tolerate shade will continue to grow if the canopy closes again; those requiring sun will die. But each death will change conditions for survivors, threatening some, reviving others.

If we decide to manage the area more actively than we have in the past years, we may chose to thin the seedlings ourselves, preserving those trees that we think have the most value for our forest.

Trees this young can be hard to identify. Bark is similar, they may not be bearing cones yet, but branches and needles have already developed mature characteristics. The older needles on the little Sitka spruce can pierce the hand that squeezes them! The hemlock already has a gently drooping leader and tender little needles. Douglas fir's blue-green needles spiral around the branch; Grand firs are bright yellow-green and flat along the sides of the stem.

The topmost branch is called the leader. In all except the hemlock, it should be standing tall and straight; the hemlock leader droops gracefully to the side. When deer or insects devour the leader, several shoots may begin growing upward, which will, in time, create a rather disorganized tree top. Examples of these are easily found whenever you look at the silhouette of a stand of conifers.