

Master Naturalist Wild Life

By Cathy Butcher

Snags

“What are you going to do about those dead trees?”

That’s a question I hear frequently on tours that I give at a local historic garden and nature preserve in my hometown. The question is in reference to two stately, yet gnarly, expired long-leaf pines on either side of a well-trimmed lawn. Mostly limbless, they have been dead for years. This question gives me the opening to explain why we would allow dead trees to exist in this garden setting.

Snags, standing dead or dying trees, are probably one of the most important features necessary for a healthy forest ecosystem. I think of them as a “keystone” feature in the environment. Without dead and dying trees a complex and diverse species of wildlife, insects, and plants would not develop. An enormous spectrum of living organisms depends on snags for survival. Everything from microorganisms to insects, birds, and mammals benefits from dead trees at some point in their life cycle. Once these standing snags fall to the ground yet another habitat is created that appeals to different species including fungi, plants, insects, and spiders.

Many of us are familiar with the sight of woodpeckers chipping out homes in dead trees. We’ve all smiled at cute pictures of raccoon babies peering out of tree cavities. And some of us have been fortunate to see bald eagles or ospreys perched in tall snags being used as a lookout. Many birds, reptiles, and amphibians need dead trees for breeding sites. In Wisconsin, over 65 species of birds and small mammals use snags for dens or nesting. Small mammals and birds also forage underneath loose bark and in rotting logs for insects. Dropped limbs and logs provide cover and runways for small animals while larger cavities, hollow trunks, and uprooted trees provide cover and dens for larger mammals. Decomposing logs slowly release valuable nutrients back into the soil and become growing sites for lichens, mushrooms, mosses, and young tree seedlings.

Snags along shorelines and rivers eventually fall into the water creating a valuable tangled woody habitat. It provides shelter for invertebrates and fish. This abundance of food attracts predators. A simplified idea of the food chain that develops goes something like this: colonies of algae form on the submerged logs, invertebrates eat the algae, small fish eat the invertebrates, larger fish eat the small fish, and fishermen arrive to catch the larger fish! Emergence of shallow water vegetation within these stabilizing structures provides cover for fish nurseries. This plant growth further enhances the habitat by helping protect the shoreline from wave erosion and produces forage and seeds for birds and mammals. Exposed portions of trunks and branches provide basking locations for turtles and perches for ducks and other birds.



Hopefully you have gotten the idea of how valuable it is to leave dying and dead trees on your property. If trees can be left without fear of damage to property or person, then the habitat will be enhanced and you will have an opportunity to enjoy a diverse range of wildlife viewing opportunities. For instructions on how to make a snag from a living tree or how to create underwater snags search online for these publications;

- Critter Condos <http://dnr.wi.gov/files/PDF/pubs/wm/WM0222.pdf>
- Fish Sticks Fact Sheet <http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr-ap/UWEXLakes/Documents/resources/healthylakes/FishSticks-HealthyLakesFactSheetSeries.pdf>