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Snags to Riches

If you attend a Conservation Commission meeting you may hear them discuss snags. Where a project proponent may find an upright decaying tree, dead and unsightly, the Commission finds it teeming with life and a critical component of a healthy forest ecosystem. Wildlife use dead trees in nearly every stage of decay for one or more critical stages of their life. Many animals, including small mammals and birds, use tree cavities to create their homes. Thirty-five species of birds in the Northeast rely on snags to build their homes. As trees decay, they attract insects, mosses, and fungi to feast on their deadwoods, which in turn creates a bountiful banquet for wildlife to dine on. Tall snags serve as look-outs or “crow’s nests” from which raptors scope out their next meal while the nooks and crannies provide their prey refuge to hide and/or a place to hide their food for a future meal. And if it served no other purpose, the slow decay returns vital nutrients back to the soil for future generations to sprout from. Hardwood trees tend to make better nesting habitats while softer wood is better for food foraging. In wetlands, a group of standing dead trees are quickly developed into double and triple decker housing for Great Blue Heron, called a rookery. Trees and branches that fall into a pond or river also create critical habitat for breeding, shelter, and feeding.

The insulation of a tree-trunk home allows wildlife to survive high summer and low winter temperature extremes. Tree cavities and loose bark are used by many animals to store their food supplies, while insects living inside the dead wood eat thousands of forest pests, which can harm living trees. Our deer even eat the lichen growing on the trunks.

After a snag falls, and becomes a log, it encourages a new ecosystem to begin. It becomes home to fungi, earthworms, and firefly larvae and shelter for frogs, toads, and amphibians. Retaining snags has become an increasingly important part of maintaining a healthy ecosystem. Without these snags and downed logs, our forests would not be able to sustain the rich diversity of wildlife that they do.

So if you have a dead or dying tree, consider if it can be left to support wildlife. If you have room in your landscape, plan for at least one snag, even if a small one. Keep an old or damaged tree, as well as tall shrubs near it to provide wildlife habitat. You can also make roosting slits for bats by making a slit at least eight inches deep, an inch or more wide, 15 feet high, and angled upward on the south side of a snag. Dying or dead trees often can remain intact for many years. If you’re unsure about the safety of a tree, consult with an arborist. Perhaps the tree is still sound, but merely weak branches need removing. When you take a tree or branches down, leave them nearby on the ground to rot and provide habitat, if possible. Then replace the lost nesting cavities with nesting boxes, appropriate for the species in your landscape. Watching the wildlife a snag can bring into your landscape, will enrich your life as well as the enhance species diversity in our forested landscape.