

# localnews

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## LIVING

# Take a stand on dying trees

## Forest and its inhabitants healthier when rotting trunks and limbs left alone

I have always loved dead trees. Not only are they a veritable magnet for wildlife, but many are quite beautiful in their own right, especially when only large branches remain. A photograph of a sunrise or sunset is often more aesthetically pleasing when it includes the bare branches of an old, dead tree reaching up into the sky. It's always fascinating, too, to see the many ways in which a dead tree changes over the years, and how it attracts different types of creatures as the decay process advances. It's little wonder that some naturalists and biologists refer to dead trees as "wildlife trees."



**Drew Monkman**

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

As I discussed two weeks ago, den trees (living trees with cavities), dead trees (snags), and fallen logs are essential features of healthy habitats. These habitats include not only forests, but also wetlands, hedgerows, savannahs, lakeshores, etc. In fact, according to a paper written by the National Wildlife Federation, "the removal of dead material from forests can mean a loss of habitat for up to one-fifth of the animals in the ecosystem." For example, red-headed woodpeckers rely heavily on snags with large limbs for nesting, foraging, and roosting. A dramatically reduced number of snags in agricultural lands and savannahs (grasslands with trees sufficiently wide-spaced so that the canopy does not close) is one of the main reasons why this species is experiencing such a precipitous decline. Obviously then, we need to let our dead trees stand.

### CHANGE OF HEART

In the past, some approaches to forest management called for the removal of dead or dying trees. They were seen as a major threat to the stability of forests – especially forests planted by man. It was argued that dead trees are ideal breeding grounds for all kinds of diseases and pests that would infect the valuable timber stock. As a result, many man-made forests were "cleaned" of dead wood. Fortunately, this attitude has changed. It soon became obvious that "cleaned" forests were still endangered by pests. The lack of natural insect predators – which depend on snags and other types of dead wood to survive – was identified as one important reason.

However, some landowners still erroneously select snags as their first choice for firewood. This is unfortunate for many reasons. Not only is vital wildlife habitat being destroyed, but decaying trees don't usually make good firewood. Nor are they competing with other trees in the forest for resources. Which trees should be used or sold as firewood? As a general rule, you should be selecting trees that are growing too close together, trees with obvious defects such as poor form, undesirable species such as non-natives, or trees with excessive limbs. Thinning a timber stand can enhance wildlife habitat by encouraging young, succulent plant growth. Small openings in the forest encourage pioneer tree

species (trees that grow only in full sun) which, in turn, leads to greater wildlife diversification.

In an optimal situation, you should have at least four snags and/or den trees larger than 20 inches in diameter at breast height (dbh) per acre. Research has shown that pileated woodpeckers, for example, require trees of at least 25 inches dbh for nesting and roosting. Trees smaller than 20 dbh are still valuable, however, especially for

smaller woodpeckers, chickadees and small mammals. A total of at least seven snags of various sizes per acre is most desirable. This means that young and middle age trees must be left to become future snags, not just the old trees you leave for today. Obviously, for safety reasons some dead trees that are in danger of falling must be cut down. The trunk and large branches can still be left on the forest floor to decompose naturally.

### MAKE DEAD TREES

If your woodland lacks snags but has a large number of living trees – some of which may be growing too close to one another – you may want to speed up the natural process by creating your own

snags. This can be done by girdling a few trees, preferably both coniferous and deciduous. Using a chainsaw, make two cuts, one above the other, around the entire trunk of the tree. This will prevent the sap from rising in the tree. To make cavities in dead or dying trees, you can also try drilling a hole at least two inches across and three inches deep into the trunk of a suitable tree. It's best to make the hole under a large limb. This will allow fungal disease into the tree to begin the decay process. Try to make sure that there are also logs on the ground and possibly sections of larger trees that have blown over. For more information on woodland management, contact the Ontario Woodlot Association at (888) 791-1103 or through email at info@ont-woodlot-assoc.org

More and more people are also



Dead trees can be a beautiful part of nature, but also are important food and nesting resources for birds like the bald eagle and red-headed woodpecker, seen here in Karl Egressy photos.



RICK STANKIEWICZ

When the moon is in a total eclipse, as it will be early in the morning of Dec. 21, the reflected light of the sun gives it an eerie, reddish orange colour.

### Dark side of the moon

An addendum to last week's December almanac: Rick Stankiewicz, President of the Peterborough Astronomical Association, has informed me that there will be a **total lunar eclipse** in the wee hours of the morning of **Dec. 21**. This is right ahead of the winter solstice!

However, the eclipse will not start until 1:32 a.m. The moon will be in total eclipse phase at 2:40 a.m., mid-way through at 3:16 a.m., ending totality at 3:53 a.m., and out of the eclipse phase at 5:01.

These are not the most convenient hours, but we will not have another chance to see a lunar eclipse in Peterborough until April 2012.

incorporating snags into their backyard habitat as a means of attracting a larger number of birds and other woodland creatures. This can be done by simply leaving a dead or dying tree as is or by girdling an existing tree – should you have a large number of trees on your property.

### LEAVE TRUNK BEHIND

If you must cut a tree, however, why not consider some alternatives to removing it completely. You can cut the upper canopy branches and leave at least 10 feet of trunk. If you have access to sufficient muscle power, you may even wish to "plant" a section of dead tree trunk in your yard and secure it with quick-drying cement. The hole should be about a third the length of the trunk. As the wood slowly decays and attracts insects, woodpeckers will probe for grubs and maybe even excavate holes that can be used by other cavity-nesting birds.

You can, of course, use cut tree trunks as natural logs by laying them on the ground in a woodland garden, along a shady walkway, or in a tangle of weeds. These trunks will provide shelter and nesting sites to a host of small creatures. They are also quite attractive in their own right.

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*Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him, go to www.kegressy.com.*