

THE LIVING DEAD

Dead trees offer habitat and sustenance to all living things.

by RON DODSON



Gull Lake View Golf Course (Michigan) left cavity nesting trees standing during construction.

DEAD TREES? Why, you may wonder, shouldn't those dead trees on your golf course be cut down? What possible function can a dead tree serve? For wildlife, dead or partially dead standing trees (also called snags) serve as sites for nesting, shelter, and food for the living. Leaving dead and dying trees standing when they don't pose a safety concern will provide valuable resources to a wide range of wildlife species. Dead trees can also be used to mount bird houses, and by creating more nesting sites, you can increase the breeding success of cavity-nesting birds. Two main groups of wildlife can benefit from a tree snag program — primary cavity nesters and secondary cavity nesters.

Primary cavity nesters are those species that must make their own cavity nest by drilling or pecking it out of the wood of a tree. Secondary cavity nesters make their homes either in cavities made by primary cavity nesters or in holes that have been created by the process of natural decay or damage caused by wind or lightning.

It's good to leave as many snags on the golf course as possible. As a good rule of thumb, some forest managers recommend up to five dead or dying trees per acre. Some golf course managers, with guidance from the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System and by educating themselves, have started their own snag manufacturing projects. One method involves cutting away a strip of bark and some of the pithy underlying tissue of a tree to kill it. Others have pruned trees back to such an extent that they will die because of the lack of foliage.

These snags become areas of insect activity, fungal growth, and overall decay. This will attract insect-eating wildlife species, some of which will be primary cavity nesters. This could include all of the woodpecker species or nuthatches. Secondary cavity nesters, like chickadees, tufted titmice, brown creepers, as well as several species of larger birds such as the screech owl

and American kestrel, will also use these trees. Some of the larger trees, such as the shagbark hickory, also provide roosting and resting places for several species of bats. Bats are the single most important form of insect-eating wildlife that flies at night.

All of this insect-eating activity is just one benefit of a tree snag program — nature's own way of controlling pests. Once a snag falls to the ground, it continues to be beneficial to wildlife as a source of food and shelter, and it returns important nutrients to the soil. You may be able to use a fallen snag and other downed limbs, twigs, and debris as part of a brush pile, providing additional wildlife shelter and protection.

Do wildlife a favor and start a snag conservation program if you don't already have one. Develop a management strategy to retain snags in various stages and in a variety of habitats. Monitor snags for safety and development of undesirable pest problems. Provide additional nesting sites for birds by leaving snags as a source of shelter and food. Reduce the number of trees and limbs you have to dispose of by leaving them standing to help all of the cavity-nesting forms of wildlife that are looking for homes.

And, most important, educate your golfers about the economic and environmental benefits of leaving dead trees to enhance habitat and provide nature's resources for the living. Write a short article for your newsletter, post a sign on a snag explaining its natural resources, take slides and post photos to demonstrate the integration of nature's way as part of the golf course — a contribution to the environment as well as to the aesthetic uniqueness of the course.

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