

Dead...and Down (Standing, too)

A few years ago, our neighbors took down a big oak tree that was dying and threatening to drop a very large branch on our cottage. I cut up the smaller branches, and some of the main trunk, but was unable to get the 20 inch bar of my chainsaw through the 40+ inch diameter log of the trunk. So there the stump and big log lay for 7 years. Every year my wife fretted at me—"When are you going to get rid of that dead wood?" she would ask.

Deadwood. As in, "When will the company/business/agency get rid of those non-productive *deadwood* employees?" Not so for many of the critters in the Keuka Lake watershed. Every year, thousands of trees die naturally but remain standing as snags. In actuality, these are wildlife hotels or condos, if you like. Likewise, every year many of these trees fall and end up as logs. These are wildlife motels. Both provide housing and food for a large variety of wildlife: birds, mammals, snakes, and salamanders.



The snag on the left has been riddled by woodpeckers. They dig out grubs and other insects that live on decaying wood. Woodpeckers (and flickers) also excavate nesting cavities in snags and raise their young in these protected nest sites. They also use the cavities as snug winter refuges from snow and cold. And, there is a whole subset of cavity-nesting birds which can't excavate these holes but depend on them for nesting sites. Like wood ducks, great crested flycatchers, screech owls, wrens, chickadees, and tree swallows. And mammals like red, gray and flying squirrels, 'possums and raccoons. In really big trees with really big cavities, you may find black bears using them as nurseries and dens.

The oak stump on the top right has rotted enough that a pileated woodpecker has begun to excavate grubs by tearing off the bark. The big log now has nooks and crannies that chipmunks and other critters can hide in and call home. Bears dig out ants and grubs. The damp interface between bark and rotting log provides the required humidity-controlled environment for salamanders. This small salamander was chasing down sow bugs and other small insects hiding under the bark.



Logs that are left to rot on the ground cycle essential nutrients back to the soil, enhancing the ability of the soil to grow and support trees, ferns, shrubs, wildflowers, and mushrooms. Deer snuggle up to them in winter to reduce their exposure to cold winds. Snags that fall across and into streams provide hiding cover for fish, and rotting material for the shredder and grinder aquatic insects that end up as food for the fish. Dead wood indeed! Try *essential* wildlife-enhancer.