

Conservation Conversations: Snags

Fine day for a picnic it was. Sunny, ocean blue sky, and a perfect temperature. Made 2 sandwiches, grabbed a couple of waters and a friend. Off we went to a favorite wooded spot. Enjoying the woodland sounds and the scenery, I broke our silence, “great snag over there.”

“Snag? What? Isn’t that an ugly tooth or something?” I immediately flashed on the wicked witch and understood the confusion (dual definitions ’ll do it every time).

“No, I mean a snag, a dead tree. That one. “I pointed. “Still standing as straight as the day it’s branches were covered with leaves.”

“Yeah, now naked, ugly and useless.”

“Not useless,” I replied between bites of sandwich. “Although no longer living and beautiful, the tree’s on to a *new life* of sorts, as a resource for many other lives.”

“Really? Like for who? I mean, for **whom?**” I couldn’t tell if he was really interested or just making conversation. Either case, I did appreciate the corrected subjective pronoun.

I decided to assume he was interested. “Different species use different parts of the snag. Nearly every part of the dead tree is utilized in every stage of decay. Hollow cavities in standing dead wood make excellent nests for woodpeckers, while insects in the bark provide a ready food source. Other animals use the bark, too. Bats, tree frogs and beetles all make their homes in the crevasses between the bark and the trunk. Higher branches become excellent look-outs for raptors to spot potential prey and, later, where they may safely clean and eat their meals....What’s the matter?” noticing his grimace. “The thought of the hawk’s meal?” I asked kiddingly.

“No, it’s **my** meal—the sandwich. Next time more mayo please.”

Ignoring the ingrate I continued, "Invertebrate communities also thrive in decaying trees. Mosses, lichens and fungi all grow on snags and aid in the return of vital nutrients to the soil through the nitrogen cycle. Moreover, they provide an important source of food for a variety of wildlife."

"Well, one day it'll fall over and just be forest litter."

"Yes, and it'll play another new role. Decaying logs on the forest floor help in another way. By acting as "nurse logs" for new seedlings, moisture-rich dead wood can help to ensure that the next generation of forest has a place to grow. These young trees, in turn, produce additional habitat for wildlife."

Lunch over, we headed back to the car. I wonder what Bob will think next time he sees a snag. A useful habitat? Or will he remember there wasn't enough "mayo"?

Moral to the story: you can create a refuge for hundreds of woodland creatures by keeping snags in your yard (or create artificial snags if no natural ones are present).