

Conservation Conversations Article 12/24/09: **Plant a Dead Tree?**

Snow was still falling and it was pretty cold outside. It was a great day to bake some cookies. I had begun pulling everything together, then—no eggs! Hmm. The car was snowed in so a trip to the market was out. “Ah, I bet my pal Bob has a spare egg,” I thought. It was a short walk to his house; so pup and I trudged off through the snow.

I let myself in the front door. “Hey, Bob, have an egg? Oh! What are you doing?” Bob had his camera mounted on a tripod and aimed out his back door across his yard.

“Shhh. I’m trying to get this just right,” he answered. I looked to see what he was focusing his lens on.

“What is that?!?” At the edge of his property was a tall, bare, tree trunk. It stood about 6’ tall, and didn’t have a branch on it—just a few stubs where branches once were.

“That, my friend, is my latest addition to the garden. I planted it just before the ground froze. Ain’t she a beauty? I drilled a couple of 1 ¼” holes in her for a bird to nest come spring. But she’s pretty rotten inside, so I should get some woodpeckers now.” He was serious.

“Well, for a dead tree she sort of fits well in that spot”, I observed, but not sure what I really thought of it.

“Please call her by her right name. She’s a ‘snag’. And adds interest and texture, in addition to habitat, don’t you think?”

"Bob, I always knew you were a bit of a tree hugger, but a dead tree?" I teased him. Then I noticed one perfectly chiseled round hole in the nearly barkless pine shaft (I could tell which ones Bob did, he's not extremely skilled with tools); and said, “Bob, your rotted tree - excuse me, 'snag' - apparently has supported a cavity nesting bird in the past, before it was removed from somebody else's yard."

“Probably” he agreed and then continued, “I find it surprising how many birds are cavity nesters and depend on rotted trees for nesting sites. Some 85 species of North American birds excavate nesting holes, use cavities resulting from decay (natural cavities), or use holes created by other species in dead or deteriorating trees; woodpeckers, flycatchers, swallows, wrens, nuthatches, and owls - to name a few.”

It seemed fitting for the snag to now be in Bob's backyard since he's an avid birder. And of course with the connection between dead wood providing habitat for native insects that birds utilize for food, as well as nesting sites.....I shouldn't have been surprised. Dead wood is good wood, I thought. Perhaps I would make a quarterboard for Bob's backyard saying just that!

I arrived home with my borrowed egg and continued with the recipe. Uh oh, one stick of butter. Who put an empty butter carton back in the fridge?!? This was not going well. Back to Bob’s. Maybe his snag has had a visitor by now.

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This article is provided by the Chatham Conservation Commission for informational purposes. For more information on the importance of dead trees / snags see these websites:

<http://www.cavitynester.org>

[http://www.na.fs.fed.us/SPFO/pubs/wildlife/nesting\\_birds](http://www.na.fs.fed.us/SPFO/pubs/wildlife/nesting_birds)

<http://www.woodlandfishandwildlife.org/pubs/cavitynestingbirds.pdf>