



*Wanted: Dead or Alive*

*A dead tree may harbor as much life as a living one.*

Many years ago my husband and I were awakened by a nearby chainsaw. As we dressed and ate our breakfast, we found the whine of the tool persisting. We decided to investigate and found a woman and a man, whom we presumed to be her husband, removing a tree from our property. I greeted her with, "Hello, how are you?" and my husband inquired curiously, "What are you

doing?" She replied, "Cutting down this tree." We asked who had given her permission and she suggested she was entitled, to which my husband replied, "No, you're not." She replied indignantly, "What business is it of yours?"

In disbelief he stated, in as polite a tone as is possible over the roar of a chainsaw, "This is our property and I prefer you leave." She persisted in a combative tone, shouting over the saw, "You must be kidding! This is a dead tree!"

With raised eyebrows, my husband and I looked at each other in shock. And I thought, here it comes, now my husband's courteous demeanor would likely take a sudden detour. "Lady," he told her, "I prefer a woodpecker to you and your husband; OUT." My husband stretched out his arm and pointed in the direction of their pickup, the man turned off his chainsaw, they muttered, and then they left.

Maybe this incident cemented my admiration for dead trees or maybe it just cemented my admiration for my husband, who kept his cool in the face

of a challenge and declared a dead tree precious.

And that is just the point: Dead trees are to be revered. Unless they present a threat they should be left standing. You may be surprised to find that often a dead tree harbors as much life as a living tree. At our house, if we feel a snag presents a problem, we will cut off the larger branches and leave the main trunk at a height that does not threaten other structures.

A large dead oak in our yard was frequented by eagles during the day and great horned owls each night; viewing these visitors gave us great pleasure and gave them an excellent roosting site. Insects also eat away at decaying trees. Birds and other animals dine by pulling off bark made loose by creatures such as beetles and their larva. Woodpeckers drill away with their sturdy beaks and skulls to eat the insects and eventually form larger holes. These holes in turn make cavities for various songbirds, squirrels, raccoons, ducks, opossums, and an endless list of interesting residents. (Fun fact: Did you know that opossums eat untold numbers of ticks!)

Birds of prey especially like to perch in dead trees for a large viewscape, which helps in launching aerial attacks. And osprey prefer nesting in dead trees more than live ones because they like an unimpeded view.

Timber has always been harvested for a great many uses. Early settlers made houses and furniture, heated homes, constructed vessels, and created countless other household objects and work implements. Different woods had different uses. In early colonial times, some trees were harvested with an insatiable appetite and little thought was given to reforestation. White cedar was especially treasured for shipbuilding and its very durable qualities. Oak, walnut, and cherry were favorites for furniture. During the industrial revolution at the turn of the 20th century, wood was burned in such great quantities to power the machinery of the era that today few trees exist in excess of 125 years old. This has changed the nature of our forests.

Many of our cavity nesting birds rely on large hardwood trees for nests. Ducks such as wood ducks, golden eye, and bufflehead; screech (pictured, photo by

author) and barn owls, and larger woodpeckers such as the pileated, need bigger trees to accommodate their larger sizes. The list of other cavity nesting birds is too numerous for listing here, but they include bluebirds, tree swallows, woodpeckers, great crested flycatchers, nuthatches, chickadees, and titmouse. The decimation of our county's hardwoods depleted the nesting possibilities for many species and their declines were drastic. Wildlife managers, conservationists, and property owners have tried to make up for the lack of dead trees by providing nesting boxes.

Furthermore, dead trees are an important component of the forest's ecosystem. Decomposing wood supports fungi and bacteria important for the growth of young saplings. Because of this, some very large dead trees are called nurse trees. So before you remove that dead tree on your property, ask yourself if it is presenting a threat, because it surely is harboring a lot of life.