

Standing Dead Trees Make a Forest Complete

BLUE MOUNTAIN—
KITTATINNY RIDGE
CONSERVATION
PROJECT

While they may be thought of as eyesores in some circles, standing dead trees play a vital role in the forest ecosystem. As a dead tree rots, it attracts a broad range of insects, which in turn bring in a variety of wildlife species. Woodpeckers drill nest holes into standing dead trees, also known as “snags.” In future years these holes are used as nesting and roosting sites by Wood Ducks, Eastern Screech-Owls, squirrels, and others. When a dead tree finally falls to the forest floor, it provides a moist environment for salamanders and helps replenish the soil and adjacent trees with nutrients as it slowly decomposes.



Howard B. Eskin

DID YOU KNOW?

Seven species of woodpeckers nest in Pennsylvania, including the Red-bellied Woodpecker (left). Woodpeckers are drawn to standing dead trees, using them both as food sources and nesting sites. Pileated Woodpeckers (right) are the largest woodpeckers in Pennsylvania, and often search for insects in rotting logs on the forest floor.



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When should a standing dead tree be left upright?

Whenever a standing dead tree does not pose a threat to human safety or a structure it is best to leave it standing. These “snags” are magnets for wildlife and keep contributing to the ecosystem for many years after they die.

What if a tree must be taken down for safety reasons?

Some dead trees must be taken down as a precaution, especially those along roads and trails, or near houses or places of business. In these cases, try to do the following, to the extent possible: (a) avoid damaging healthy trees and shrubs when taking the dead tree down, (b) leave the dead tree’s material in the forest, (c) place the main trunk down in a spot that does not trample any unique wildflower patches or block water flow.

How should I determine if a tree poses a threat?

When in doubt, a professional arborist should always be consulted. The International Society for Arboriculture has developed a list of considerations for potential hazard trees in both urban and rural settings. These are available through their website at www.treesaregood.com/treecare/hazards.aspx.