

What good is
a dead tree?

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That's a very good question! Answer this question first. How many of the animals listed below use dead trees in some way?

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> gray squirrel | <input type="checkbox"/> raccoon | <input type="checkbox"/> red-tailed hawk |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Virginia opossum | <input type="checkbox"/> eastern bluebird | <input type="checkbox"/> black rat snake |
| <input type="checkbox"/> broadhead skink | <input type="checkbox"/> American kestrel | <input type="checkbox"/> great horned owl |
| <input type="checkbox"/> barred owl | <input type="checkbox"/> little brown bat | <input type="checkbox"/> pileated woodpecker |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carolina wren | <input type="checkbox"/> Indiana bat | <input type="checkbox"/> gray treefrog |
| <input type="checkbox"/> red-headed woodpecker | <input type="checkbox"/> belted kingfisher | <input type="checkbox"/> wood duck |
| <input type="checkbox"/> white-footed mouse | <input type="checkbox"/> fox squirrel | <input type="checkbox"/> southern flying squirrel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> northern flicker | | |

If you said all of them, you are right, and you are on the way to understanding the importance of dead trees. More than 85 different birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians in Illinois use dead trees. These dead trees are sometimes called "snags." Nationwide, more than 300 species use dead trees, and this number does not include the many species of insects, slugs and other critters called invertebrates (an invertebrate is an animal that does not have a backbone).

How Do Animals Use Dead Trees?

Dead trees are important to animals in several ways. Some animals, such as woodpeckers, look for insects and make their own holes, or "cavities" for nests. Later, squirrels, other birds, raccoons, and even mice will reuse these cavities for nests. Several species of bats settle and have their young under a dead tree's loose, hanging bark.

A dead tree can be a perch used by hawks and owls while they search for prey. Smaller birds, such as bluebirds and flycatchers, also use snags to spot and catch insects.

As the limbs and bark of a dead tree fall to the ground, insects will begin to digest the wood. These invertebrates in turn will be eaten by skunks, salamanders, birds and lizards. The dead, entangled branches can serve as natural brush piles in which rabbits can hide. If a snag is standing near a stream or lake, the fallen debris creates valuable cover for fishes and other aquatic species.



So Why Do We Need Dead Trees?

Remember, snags have features that live trees do not have, and it is those features that provide many species of animals with some of life's necessities. When cutting firewood or cleaning up a woodlot, try to keep several dead trees. Not only will you be helping many species of wildlife you can easily see, you also help more "tiny" invertebrates than you could ever realize.

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