



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Wildlife Diversity News

Conservation and Recreation

February 14, 2025

How Dead Trees Help Wildlife



In 2025, the Wildlife Diversity Program is releasing a series of articles throughout the year on how to support wildlife where you live. We will focus on five areas where humans and wildlife can connect. They all represent positive actions that can be taken to make your little corner of the world a little more welcoming to wildlife. This month we are highlighting some actions you can take to **Embrace Wildness**.



Jim Hudgins, USFWS Midwest Region

Trees are important features of a backyard or property, providing shade and a place for wildlife to live. Trees often live for decades or even centuries so it may come as a surprise if have a tree die on your property. Trees die for many reasons, and you may currently have a dead standing tree on your property or a few cut logs from a downed tree piled in a back corner.

Many people see dead trees or downed logs and think they look untidy and need to be “cleaned up.” However, many wildlife species benefit from dead trees and downed logs and see a place to live and find food. There is often more “life” in a dead tree than when it was living. Sometimes embracing the “mess” in your yard can benefit wildlife.

Countless wildlife species utilize dead standing trees in many ways. In Iowa, all of our seven woodpecker species utilize both living and dead trees to forage for food and excavate nest cavities, with many of them preferring to construct nest cavities in dead trees.

Over 30 species of birds in Iowa use cavities for nesting, though more than half of these species can't build their own cavities and rely on natural holes or those made by woodpeckers. Common cavity nesting birds besides woodpeckers include Wood Ducks, White-breasted Nuthatches, House Wrens, Eastern Bluebirds, Black-capped Chickadees, Eastern Screech-owls, and Tree Swallows. Only a thin outer layer of a tree is living, with the inner part of the tree made up of non-living wood. If a tree gets an injury, this inner wood often rots away, leaving an open cavity inside the tree. Open cavities inside both living and dead standing trees and downed logs provide shelter for countless species of wildlife including squirrels, chipmunks, foxes, striped skunks, bats, Virginia opossums, snakes, tree frogs, and raccoons to name just a few! Hollow fallen logs and dead standing trees provide locations for species such as chipmunks and squirrels to cache food resources like acorns for later use.



Dead trees and downed logs are also really important for many detritivore species, which feed on dead plants and animals. There is a wide diversity of detritivores, including insects like carpenter ants or millipedes, and other animals such as earthworms and snails. Many of these detritivores are at the base of the food chain, providing nutrients to many other wildlife. Decomposers such as fungi also help break down dead plants and animals and eventually turn them into soil nutrients.

Fallen logs provide cover for wildlife and create a cooler and moister microclimate underneath. Salamanders, snakes, toads, small rodents, and many insects use logs for cover. In winter, fallen logs provide a higher surface for wildlife such as chipmunks, squirrels, mice, and raccoons to move easier in deep snow.



Even with all the benefits of standing dead trees or downed logs, safety should be your number one priority. Only leave standing dead trees if they do not pose safety risks to people or animals or a hazard to property. If you are unsure about whether it is safe to leave a dead standing tree, consult with a tree professional or your local Iowa DNR district forester before deciding whether to leave the dead tree. If you do need a tree removed from your yard, you may be able to ask a tree professional to leave the lower portion of a dead tree trunk in your yard after they remove the crown portions of the tree if they determine it won't be a hazard.

While it may not always be possible to leave all the dead trees or logs in your yard, even taking a small step such as leaving a few branches or pieces of wood can be beneficial to wildlife like insects and birds that eat insects. When safe to do so, leaving standing dead trees and fallen logs in your yard is one of the most cost-effective ways to benefit wildlife and attract them to your yard. So, the next time you see a dead standing tree or downed log, don't think of it as an eyesore, but rather as a "condo and restaurant" for countless wildlife species.

Want to learn more about ways dead trees can benefit wildlife on your property? Check out the links below!

[Iowa DNR District Forester Contacts](#)

[Penn State Extension Article - Dead Wood for Wildlife](#)

[Woodworking for Wildlife](#) - One option if you don't have dead trees on your property is building a nest or roost box.

