



Updates from the Trail: December 2022

If a Tree Falls in the Forest...

One of the most common comments we get from people who walk our trails is concern about the number of dead trees in the woods.

A good amount of deadwood in a forest is one of the key indicators of a healthy forest system as dead trees are critical for a wide variety of wildlife. Standing dead trees (called snags) provide housing for dozens of cavity nesting birds and animals like the downy woodpecker, eastern screech owl, and chipmunks. The insects and fungi that breakdown the dead wood are critical overwintering food sources for critters like birds, deer, and skunks. Birds of prey such as hawks and osprey use snags as perches, searching for unsuspecting prey below.

Larger animals like coyotes and foxes or even bears (although not on the Cape) use logs for dens. Rotting logs provide pockets of moisture for salamanders, become “nurseries” for tree saplings, providing them a nutrient rich base in which to take root. Carpenter bees use their powerful mandibles to excavate holes in deadwood for their nests, while mason and leafcutter bees prefer to use already made holes from beetles.

Tree tops that get blown over and hung up in the canopy become hotspots for spiders to lay their traps, and for flycatching birds to steal an easy meal from the spiders.

When a tree falls in the forest, although you may not hear it, you will certainly know it. Countless organisms, from fungi to hawks and coyotes, depend on deadwood for one reason or another. Nothing goes to waste in nature, and deadwood is a critical component for wildlife and the health of our forests.

If you have some tree work that needs to be done at your home, consider saving some of the logs and placing them strategically in your garden. This will bring that critical habitat into your backyard. You’ll be surprised by what you’ll see using it!

You can learn more about the wildlife that uses deadwood by visiting the article [“Dead Wood for Wildlife” by the PennState Extension](#).



downy woodpecker visits a dead branch of a pitch pine at the Hay Conservation Center (8/29/2022)



An eastern red-backed salamander found under a black cherry tree log at the Vernal Pool Trail (9/27/2022). These salamanders coexist with bacteria on their skin that fight off fungal pathogens.