

Create a Snag

By Nancy Crowell
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Give old trees new life

When you must remove a tree, whether it is dying, storm damaged or has outgrown its space, consider leaving a snag instead of having the entire tree and stump removed. Why leave a snag? While some people may view a snag as unsightly, snags are actually an important element of any natural landscape and can attract birds and wildlife to your yard.

According to the USDA Forest Service, west of the Cascades some 39 species of birds and 14 species of mammals depend on tree snags for their survival. More than 100 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians in Washington state use snags for everything from food storage to nesting. Snags are especially critical in winter, when birds such as northern flickers may find insects in them to eat, brown creepers and even bats may roost behind loose bark on snags, and raptors and owls may perch on them to hunt for food.

All types of woodpeckers are attracted to snags and will hollow out spaces that will be used by other birds, but that process takes a while. If you are removing a tree, you can not only create a snag, but enhance it to speed up the usability for a variety of birds and wildlife.

Any kind of tree is a potential snag, but certain trees are especially good for snags in our area. According to Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), large trees, 12 inches in diameter and at least 15 feet tall make the best snags, but even smaller snags will accommodate species such as nesting chickadees. Conifers tend to rot more slowly than deciduous trees, but both create snags used by wildlife. WDFW suggest the trees most favored by wildlife in our area include Douglas fir, western red cedar, big-leaf maple, cottonwood, and alder. The soft wood trees, like fir, are preferred for food foraging, while hardwoods make better homes for nesting cavities.

There are many ways to create snags in your landscape. Simply cutting off the top third of the tree is sufficient to create a snag that will eventually rot and make room for new residents. However, an experienced arborist can use techniques to improve a snag and make it wildlife-ready from the day you cut down your tree.

First, if the treetop isn't already broken off, the top can be roughed up and a hole drilled in it to make it more open to water, which will seep in and speed up the decay process. Other cuts in the snag provide options for wildlife – long slits might be attractive to nesting bats, and small birds such as brown creepers, holes might attract woodpeckers, and cavities that have been carved out and then re-capped with bark “doors” offer options for nesting birds.



While any tree is potentially a snag for wildlife, a tree with at least a 12-15 inch diameter offers options for many different species. Some 100 species in Washington state depend on snags to survive. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

It's even possible to create a snag out of a living tree. If you have a tree that is showing signs of decay, such as weeping sap, dead limbs, fungi on the bark or holes from woodpeckers, you have a potential snag. To improve its use for wildlife without removing it, you can opt to leave the tree as it is, but remove a majority of the side limbs, cut off the top third of the tree, girdle the tree trunk or girdle the branches.

The US Forest Service suggests one snag per three acres is a good ratio for large forest areas or tracts of land. WDFW offers this advice to prevent invasive species, such as European starlings and house sparrows, from taking over a snag: reduce the size of an existing hole to 1 and 1/8 inches. An arborist can create a cavity in the tree and then cover it with the original bark with the right sized hole as well.

Scientists are still studying the contributions of snags on biodiversity, but the research collected so far indicates snags truly play an important role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem. As the snag decays it will eventually put nutrients back into the surrounding soil, and in the meantime you will have the benefit of watching all the wildlife that takes advantage of all a snag has to offer.



A knowledgeable arborist can modify a fresh snag to make it friendly to wildlife. This is a close-up of an open cavity that has been covered with original bark. A hole was put in the bark to enable wildlife to enter the cavity and use it for nesting. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

- https://wdfw.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/snags-the_wildlife_tree-1.pdf
- <https://www.conservationnw.org/our-work/wildlands/snag-trees/>
- <https://www.nwf.org/Garden-for-Wildlife/Cover/Trees-and-Snags>
- <https://www.conservationnw.org/our-work/wildlands/snag-trees/>