

# SHELTERS FROM THE STORMS: Dreys, Snags & Brush Piles

WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT | PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS

The season of winter provides unique opportunities for observing birds and animals, for those who know the signs. Three structures that are used year-round, dreys, snags and brush piles, can be of interest at this time of year.

▲ The moon has already risen as the sun sets early in winter. With leaves gone from trees, this drey or squirrels' den is clearly visible high in a tree.



◀ This snag is riddled with holes from woodpeckers, which now could serve as shelters for birds and small animals, even at the same time. “I like to think of good holey snags as condominiums without discriminating landlords,” says Bruce Mackenzie.

mites and fleas become too numerous. Sometimes, two or more squirrels will share a drey, curling up together to share body heat. Squirrels don’t hibernate, and in the winter they will leave the drey to forage for food during the warmest hours of the day, unless it is very cold or stormy.”

Bruce Mackenzie, a former manager at Hamilton Conservation Authority and a current director of Hamilton Naturalists’ Club, adds “Dreys are usually found in deciduous trees like maples and oaks as their branching leans towards having suitable crotches for squirrels to use as a base for the drey. The size of tree is usually large, relative to the rest of the trees, as the larger size reduces sway in the wind and provides better crotching in the branching.”

**Dead Trees**

“Snag is a word for a standing dead tree,” says Bruce. “Snags are one of the most important elements in a forest. They provide homes for countless life forms from insects to birds and mammals. Without snags many species cannot exist in our forests. Snags are used as nesting sites for birds and mammals. Usually snags have cavities in them caused by branches falling off the trees, leaving areas for rot to take place, physical injury or woodpecker holes. As wood decays it becomes softer allowing for greater numbers of cavities to open up.”

Bruce believes that there may be as many as 85 species of birds in North America that use tree cavities for nesting.



◀ This small brush pile near a pond has a close source of fresh water. The many tracks leading to the open water show that large animals also frequent the spring.



▲ Whether drey or old nest, this home appears to be made mostly of moss.

**Spherical Nests**

“A drey is a spherical nest made of leaves and twigs, found in the fork between tree branches, well above the ground,” says Laura Timms, ecologist in natural heritage management for Credit Valley Conservation. “Dreys can be distinguished from stick nests

made by birds, by the presence of leaves, by their spherical shape, and by the fact that they are not open at the top.”

Dreys are made by squirrels at almost any time of the year, although mostly in the fall. According to Laura, in Ontario they are made by Eastern Grey Squirrels,

Southern and Northern Flying Squirrels, and only on Pelee Island, Fox Squirrels.

“Dreys are used as a den, for shelter, sleeping, and nesting,” continues Laura. “Adult squirrels will make more than one drey in case one is disturbed, and may move from one to another when



▲ Small brush pile in a forest with some animal tracks nearby.



▲ The remains of a meal. This debris from a pine cone was close to a brush pile. A collection of edibles like this is called a larder.

▲ As dead trees decay, they provide food and shelter for insects, birds and animals. According to Bruce Mackenzie, small mammals who over-winter together in tree cavities will change positions so that the ones on the outside get a turn on the inside where it is warmer. This writer's mother once reported hearing snoring from the inside of a snag.

He adds that mice, squirrels, fishers, weasels, porcupines and bats also use the holes for resting or hibernating.

"Forests with a diversity of tree species and with a diversity of ages give rise to a diversity of life forms," Bruce says. "Old-growth forests are full of dead trees and fallen logs. If I had a choice I would rather see 10

healthy trees cut out of the forest than one big dead one."

Laura adds "Snags are a part of healthy forest ecosystems. They provide habitat and food for all kinds of wildlife. In Ontario, that includes at least 38 bird species, several mammals, amphibians, and reptiles, and countless insects, spiders, and fungi.

Many species use cavities in snags for nesting and shelter, including birds, for example owls, wood ducks, nuthatches, wrens, chickadees; mammals, for example, bats, squirrels, racoons, bears; amphibians like tree frogs; and reptiles like the Gray Rat Snake. Raptors such as eagles, hawks and owls will perch on top of snags

while hunting to observe the surrounding area, or to sun themselves. Finally, many species of wildlife use snags for food. Some organisms eat the dying tree directly, such as fungi, and wood-boring insects, while others feed on those species, such as woodpeckers, predatory insects and spiders." **Sticks and Twigs**

"Brush piles are made up of branches of various sizes, and often have vines and other vegetation growing on them," says Laura. "They form naturally in forests when storms cause tree branches to drop, and can also collect in areas when spring flood waters carry debris along a path." Both Laura and Bruce

point out that people can make effective brush piles. "They can be of any design," says Bruce, "from just a few branches piled up on each other to an assortment of small logs piled together and covered with smaller branches. They are excellent places for small wildlife to hide and take shelter. Think

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▲ Autumn evidence of a snag in the making. These are wood chips likely made by a Pileated Woodpecker.



► Future snag: this big, living maple has the wood chips seen above, at its base. There are at least three fresh woodpecker holes in the trunk.

◀ A drey stands out high in a tree while the setting sun paints a pink streak in the sky. Laura Timms explains that squirrels weave twigs together to form a hollow sphere with an entrance near the tree trunk, and line the inside with grass, moss, pine needles or feathers.

rabbits for nesting and hiding.”

Laura adds “Brush piles can provide cover from predators, shelter from weather, nesting sites, perching sites, food, and temperature regulation for many wildlife species, including small mammals, birds, snakes, frogs, salamanders, bees, and other insects and spiders.”

**How to Help**

“Leave standing dead trees alone,” declares Bruce,” and leave logs on the ground. Where windfalls have been removed, brush piles can be created. Add animal nesting boxes in woods that have few good old snags with cavities.”

Laura agrees. “Landowners with forest on their property can allow dead or dying trees to remain standing, allowing for the creation of snags and their persistence on the landscape.



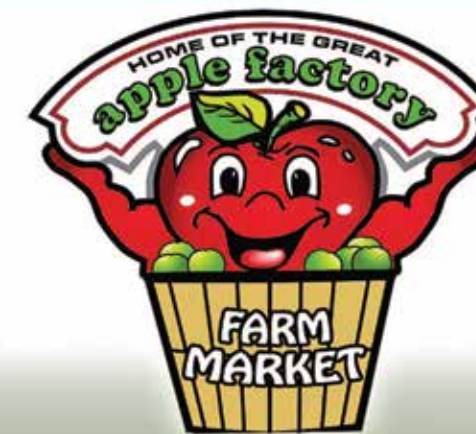
Urban landowners that have a small number of trees can also incorporate snags into their property. Although the tops of dead trees in an urban yard may need to be removed for safety, the bottom 10 to 15 feet of a tree can be left, and will still provide important resources.”

Laura adds the important point “Many types of wildlife habitat are protected under the Provincial Policy Statement as Significant Wildlife Habitat.

This includes features such as bat hibernacula, raptor foraging and perching habitat, and old growth forest among many others.”

For more information, contact your local conservation authority. **NEV**

*Gloria Hildebrandt and Mike Davis are the founders, owners and publishers of Niagara Escarpment Views.*



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