



Reflections on backyard birding throughout Illinois

by Robert Fisher

Every birder's back yard needs a dead or dying tree – or at least a big dead branch in an otherwise live tree. When you think about it, how many times have you had some mystery bird (especially one of those pesky warblers) flitting around in dense foliage, providing nothing more than brief, tantalizing glimpses? Then suddenly, they pop out onto a dead branch – or better yet – fly into a nearby dead or leafless tree, giving you an exceptional look at – another Butter Butt, aka Yellow-rumped Warbler. All you can think of is I was so sure it had to be something good: a Worm-eating, or a Cerulean! Well, you get the idea...though on rare occasions, it actually turns out to be some highly sought after species, and you get the best look you've had in years.

But dead/dying trees do a lot more than provide “Wasn't-that-a-great-look” gratification to birders. They serve myriad functions for the birds all around us, from nest cavities or platforms, to perches for territorial behavior, to food sources, to sentinel or lookout locations, even to shelters for some species. Wildlife biologists commonly use the term “snag” as synonymous with “dead tree” and numerous Internet websites emphasize the importance of snags, especially for birds, but also for other wildlife.

At least 26 native Illinois breeding species and 3 non-native species use tree cavities for nesting. The list of Illinois cavity nesters encompasses a wide spectrum of bird families. It includes two ducks (Wood Duck and Hooded Merganser), American Kestrel, three owls (Barn, Screech and Barred), Chimney Swift, our

seven species of woodpecker, Great Crested Flycatcher, Tree Swallow, both our chickadee species, Tufted Titmouse, both nuthatches, three wrens (Carolina, Bewick's and House), Eastern Bluebird and Prothonotary Warbler.

The three non-natives are European Starling, House Sparrow and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Sadly, starlings aggressively outcompete some of our native cavity nesters, adversely impacting their nesting success and almost certainly contributing to population declines. Starlings likely also caused the large drop in the number of Eastern Bluebirds, before they began to rebound with the use of bluebird boxes and bluebird trails. In addition, House Sparrows helped cause the decline in Cliff Swallow nesting in Illinois.

Karen and I have witnessed battles between starlings and woodpeckers for nest holes in the half dead willows in the rear of our back yard, and the starlings almost always triumph.

Of course nest cavities are not always in a snag. But generally a cavity is excavated by a woodpecker in a dead or dying branch, or perhaps a limb breaks off, exposing the heartwood, which rots away, leaving a cavity behind. So the next time a big branch of that oak in your yard breaks off right next to the trunk, don't worry, it may just be a nest cavity for a Great Crested Flycatcher in a year or two. Then in the winter, local birds will use it to shelter from our long, very cold nights.

Snags, or just dead and dying branches, are important food sources, especially for woodpeckers. This can