

lead to some pretty arresting images. Witness a Pileated Woodpecker making the chips fly like a chainsaw as they excavate for those juicy bark beetle grubs in a dying tree. When we had our cottage in northern Wisconsin, we saw Pileateds doing this fairly regularly in the woods; we live in hope that this magnificent woodpecker becomes more common around Chicago, and we envy IOSers downstate whose backyards have Pileateds as regular visitors.

By now you're probably saying to yourself: Hey, I don't live in the middle of the woods. There's not a Pileated Woodpecker to be found in 50 miles. It's just a suburban backyard with a few trees – so why should I want to have a dead tree out there, spoiling the view? Just remember, even if not a nest cavity opportunity or a potential food source, that dead tree or snag still will serve both your local birds and the migrants that pass through.

Male Downy Woodpeckers absolutely love to drum on a nice resonant dead branch to announce their territorial ambitions. Male Red-bellied Woodpeckers do the same. Both

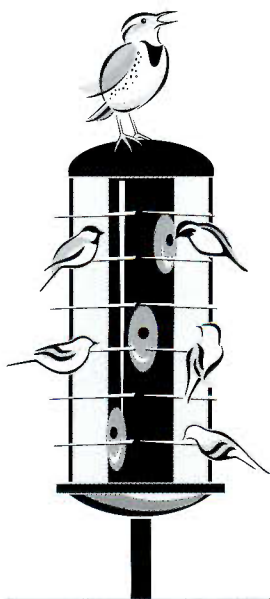
species have adapted very well to our suburban landscape, so if you provide the drumming board, they will drum – and it's certainly preferable to them drumming on the flashing around your (or your neighbor's) chimney.

Don't underestimate the value of that dead tree or limb as an observation post – for the birds. A number of years ago, Karen and I used to marvel at how many bird species used a large dead elm tree to survey our yard, seek food or look for predators. We even kept a dead elm bird list, which grew to 80+ species before the elm was toppled in a windstorm. Today a willow dying from the top down serves the same purpose, though our dead willow species list is not as long – the willow is farther from the house, making it harder to identify the smaller birds. Whenever a Cooper's Hawk makes a run through our yard (something happening ever more frequently these days), a good percentage of the birds the Coop flushes head right up to the top of our dying willow, perching there and watching the hawk until it leaves the area. And of course, if you want to add Olive-sided Fly-catcher to your yard list, a

snag sticking out a bit from the canopy is an essential.

If you don't have one already, get your very own snag! It's as easy as just leaving those big dead branches or that dying tree alone. More proactively, if you've got an unsightly and unwanted weed tree like a box elder or silver maple, simply girdle it by cutting the bark away all around the tree's circumference, 2-3 feet above the ground. For the really ambitious, you can undertake a project described in a birding magazine a few years ago: Dig a big hole in your yard, find and get permission to cut a 20-30 foot snag, get a crane and a big flatbed, cut and lower the snag onto the flatbed, bring it to your yard, set it upright in the hole, pour some concrete and – instant snag! Sounds like a perfect Saturday afternoon project to me. Of course, if your yard is a 40-acre woodlot, you already know how important it is to leave those existing snags alone.

– Robert Fisher
715 86th Place
Downers Grove, IL 60516
bfisher928@aol.com



Artwork by Jenny Vogt.

We Need Your Thoughts...

I'd welcome your feedback on this column, as it may become a regular feature in the Meadowlark. I'd especially like your yard and feeder bird stories and observations, which we can build into future columns. The editor and I both hope we can make this column a place where IOS members who enjoy backyard birding can share their experiences. Send me your observations, interesting visitors and the like. That's why the column subtitle is: Reflections on backyard birding throughout Illinois.

You can reach me at: bfisher928@aol.com or by phone at 630-985-2956. Tell me your story and I'll write it down. I look forward to hearing from you.