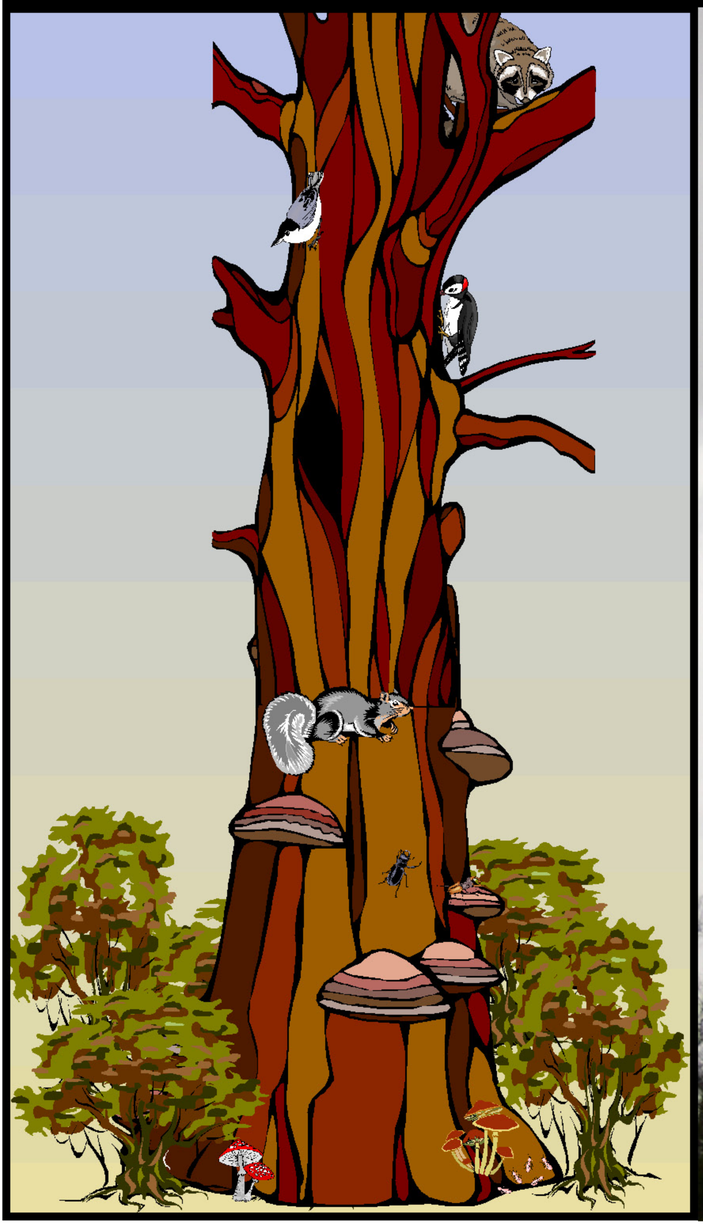
SNAG: Life in a Dead Tree

A **snag** is created when disease, stress, storms, fires or old age causes the death of a tree. Once a tree dies, the slow process of **decomposition** begins. This process recycles the nutrients consumed by the tree back into the environment. This can take many years and is dependant upon the type of tree and the habitat in which it grew. Many different species of plants and animals play an important role in speeding up the process. A snag acts as a nursery for these plants and animals by providing a source of food, shelter from the elements, and protection from predators. The plants and animals that use a snag are interrelated and rely upon the death of a tree to complete their individual life cycles.



Cavity nesting birds are attracted to snags for many reasons. They make convenient perches for singing and for catching flying insects. Using their chisel-like bills, woodpeckers easily excavate nesting holes in the decaying wood of a snag. A nest cavity excavated by one species of bird may be used by an entirely different species later that year and in succeeding years. Bluebirds, nuthatches, and chickadees are known to use existing nesting holes. A large snag can provide multiple homes for several species of birds.

Small mammals will use these old nest holes as well. Red, grey and flying squirrels will often use these vacant holes for their dens. Sometimes an entire limb may fall off of the of the tree, creating a bigger cavity in which larger mammals, such as raccoons and opossums, will use as their dens. Striped skunks often dig into a rotting log foraging for grubs or other insects.

Insects play an important role in the decomposing process. Many different kinds of beetles lay their eggs in the dead wood and after hatching; the larvae consume the wood fiber as they grow. Eventually, they grow to adulthood completing their life cycle. Several species of birds and animals eat the insect larvae and adults that reside within the decaying tree. Termites consume the wood and produce nutrient rich waste. Some types of fungi thrive off of these wastes.

Fungi also play a key role in this process. Many people recognize mushrooms as fungus, but the mushroom is really just the fruiting body (or flower) of the actual fungus. A vast network of roots travel throughout the decomposing tree below the surface. Enzymes and chemicals produced by fungi help to break down the wood fibers recycling nutrients back into the environment.

NATURE NOTE :

36 species of cavity nesting birds are found in eastern forests. Without snags, these birds would disappear.

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