

LETTER: Dead wood is key to healthy forest

- October 26, 2022 6 hrs ago



Dead wood is alive. It provides housing for mammals, both large and small. Thirty-three species of birds nest in cavities of dead trees, according to retired Pennsylvania Game Commission Wildlife Biologist Jerry Hassinger, who spoke at the Oct. 13 Friends of White's Woods webinar.

The accumulation of organic material, including damp, rotting wood and leaves, favorably affects mushroom populations. Mushrooms are food for insects, turtles, birds, mice, squirrels and deer.

But beyond providing for wildlife habitat and food, Hassinger explained, dead wood breaks down to provide essential nutrients for soil. A dead tree becomes infested with fungi and insects and as the tree decomposes, essential nutrients are recycled into the soil. Dead wood is key to the health of a forest.

Should you remove dead trees? Not deep in the forest, Hassinger said. Dead wood should be cleared out only if it poses an immediate risk, such as along a trail or road.

Hassinger was asked if forest dead wood might pose a significant fire risk. "No!" he said. The conditions for fire risk in Pennsylvania are far different than they are in the western United States. Healthy forests need dead trees.

Hassinger also informed the webinar audience about the mycelium network — the dense forest underground network that connects trees and plants, provides nutrients, and even absorbs carbon. One square foot of underground soil houses the equivalent of 300 miles (if stretched end to end) of mycelium. And disturbing this network, by tilling the soil, for instance, dramatically disturbs the network of nutrient support needed for the survival of surrounding trees and plants.

There are over 7,200 known fungi species in Pennsylvania and twice the number of plant species, but only recently has the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources begun to consider conservation of this critical aspect of our natural environment.

To learn more, Hassinger recommended books, including “The Hidden Life of Trees and Endangered Life: How Fungi Make our World, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Future” — or listen to this webinar recording at friendsof whiteswoods.org.

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