

EXTENSION NOTES



CAVITY TREES ARE REFUGES FOR WILDLIFE

To many people, a dead or dying, partly hollowed tree hardly seems worth preserving. Yet to many birds and mammals, these “cavity” trees are a vital source of food, shelter and safety.

By letting cavity trees remain on your property, you can provide important habitat for wildlife.

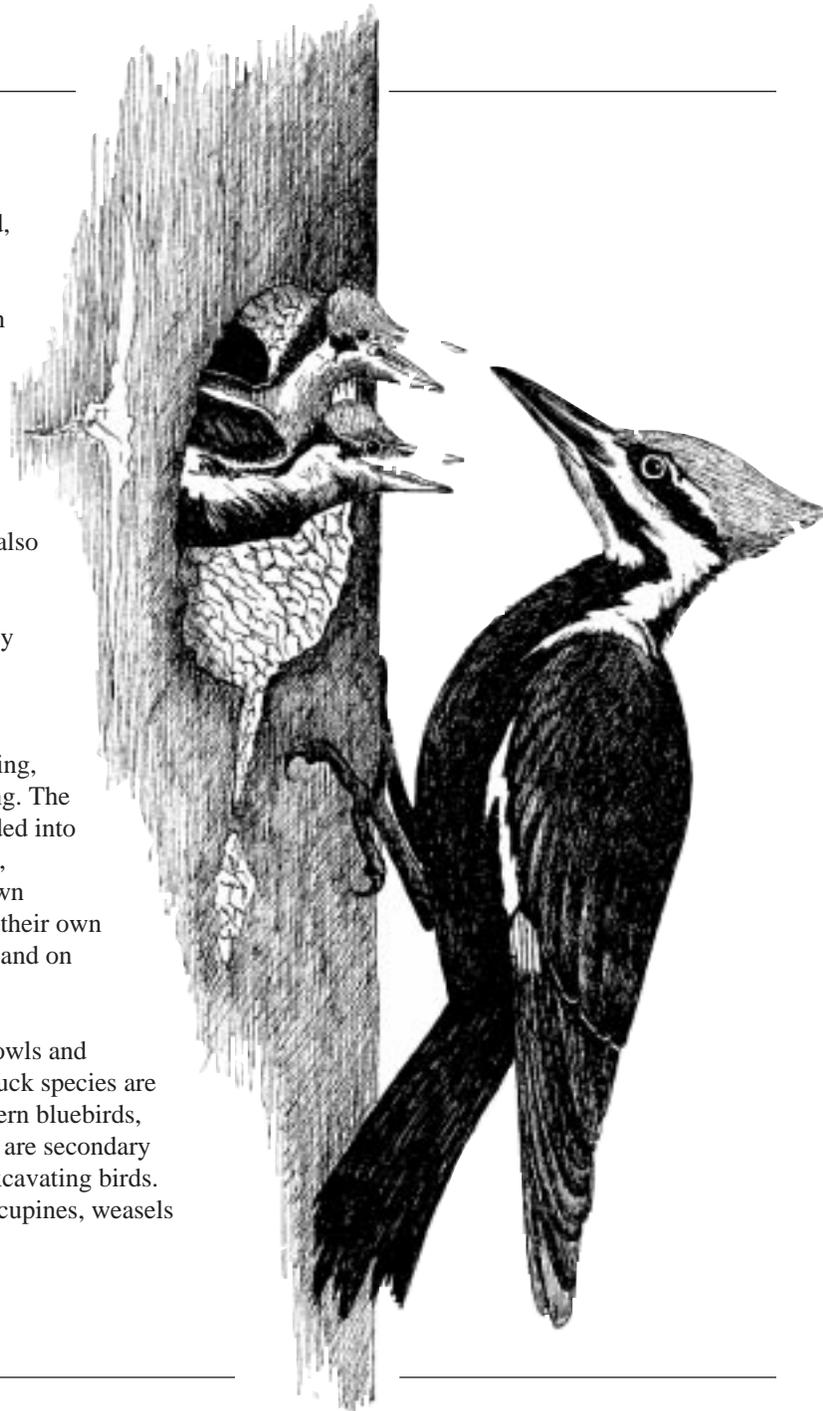
WHAT ARE CAVITY TREES?

Cavity trees are dead or dying trees that have one or more holes in the trunk or main branches. Cavities can also be found in some healthy trees, such as basswoods.

Cavities are excavated by birds. They are also created by decay and by broken branches.

In Ontario, more than 50 species of birds and mammals depend on cavity trees for nesting, rearing young, roosting, feeding, storing food, escaping predators and hibernating. The bird and mammal species that use tree cavities are divided into two groups. Primary cavity-users, such as woodpeckers, chickadees and the red-breasted nuthatch, make their own cavities. Secondary cavity-users are unable to excavate their own cavities. They rely on cavities excavated by other birds and on naturally occurring cavities.

Secondary cavity users include saw-whet owls, barred owls and kestrels. Common goldeneyes, wood ducks and other duck species are members of this group. Many songbirds, including eastern bluebirds, great-crested flycatchers and white-breasted nuthatches are secondary cavity users. Mammals also rely on cavities made by excavating birds. They include deer mice, martens, fishers, raccoons, porcupines, weasels and black bears.



WHAT WILDLIFE LOOK FOR IN A CAVITY TREE

Not all cavities are the same. The size, shape and location of cavities determine how wildlife species use them. Generally speaking, cavities fall into three categories:

- nest or den cavities
- escape or roost cavities
- feeding cavities

NEST OR DEN CAVITIES

Nest or den cavities are used by birds or mammals for nesting and rearing their young. They should be left standing on your property unless they pose a safety risk.

Excavated nest holes are usually surrounded by relatively healthy wood. They are often circular, with clean edges and surfaces. They may also appear dark because they lead to a hollow chamber. Nest cavities created by decay or broken branches are often more irregular in shape.

In most cases a primary user, such as a woodpecker, will nest in a cavity only once, preferring to notch-out a new nest hole in the same or another tree the following year.

Some primary users, such as the yellow-bellied sapsucker, like to create nest holes in live trees. Others, like the downy woodpecker, prefer the dead parts of living trees or snags, which are standing dead trees.

Once a primary user has abandoned a nest hole, it becomes a valuable site for many other birds and mammals. Saw-whet owls, wood ducks, grey squirrels, martens and many other species use vacated holes for nesting and rearing their young.



Nest cavity created by a broken branch



Excavated nest hole

ESCAPE OR ROOST CAVITIES

Not all holes in trees are suitable for nesting. Some provide temporary shelter from the elements or protection from predators. These are called escape or roost cavities.

Pileated woodpeckers, for example, create roosting trees by excavating many football-shaped holes along the trunk of a hollow tree. At night they enter the hollow by one of the holes and cling to the inside and sleep. This gives them many exits to choose from if a predator tries to trap them inside.

Trees with large escape cavities are also used by larger mammals, such as black bears, who use them for shelter and winter hibernation.



Escape hole



Feeding holes

FEEDING CAVITIES

Birds carve feeding cavities to find food, such as carpenter ants or the larvae of wood-boring beetles. Because they are rarely used for nesting or roosting, feeding cavities are not as valuable to wildlife as other kinds of cavities.

Feeding cavities can look like excavated nest holes, but most are more irregular in shape and have rough edges and surfaces. They are also lighter in color because they don't lead to hollow chambers.

PROTECT CAVITY TREES ON YOUR PROPERTY

In southern Ontario, the early logging practices of the 1800s and 1900s removed only the healthiest of trees, leaving an abundance of cavity trees for wildlife. However, as harvesting operations became more efficient, the number of cavity trees began to decline.

Today, loggers, woodlot owners, farmers and urban dwellers are being encouraged to preserve cavity trees, when possible. The following guidelines will help you choose the cavity trees that are most valuable to wildlife.

- Leave at least six cavity trees on each hectare of land
- In order of priority, leave living trees with nest and den cavities, followed by escape and roost cavities, then feeding cavities.
- Protect potential cavity trees (trees that may appear to have rotten cores) when there is a shortage of trees with existing cavities. Basswoods are a good choice.
- Leave trees with many cavities of various sizes, which are more valuable than those with a single cavity.
- Choose trees that have cavities in the upper trunk, which are more valuable than those in the lower trunk.
- Leave cavities of all sizes, but give priority to big cavities which provide habitat for more species than small cavities.
- Give priority to hardwood cavity trees, which live longer than softwood trees.
- Leave cavity trees that have a low risk of blowing down.
- Remove trees that pose a risk to human safety or property.

For more information on preserving cavity trees contact your local conservation authority or office of the Ministry of Natural Resources.



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Produced by:

- LandOwner Resource Centre

With support from:

- Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources

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ISSN 1198-3744

R.P.

(5k P.R., 99 09 09)

Order Number: LRC 8

Cette publication est également
disponible en français.