

“BUILDING” A NATURAL CAVITY

Cavity tree and den tree are terms commonly used to describe a tree with a hole that’s potentially usable by wildlife.

It can take natural events over 50 years to “build” a tree-cavity suitable for use by a family of Gray Squirrels or Barred Owls. A hollow tree used by honey bees might be 100 years in the making. Unfortunately, what takes years for nature to “build” can be destroyed in minutes.

Frequently, people planning to cut trees ask, “How many cavity trees should I save [from cutting] for wildlife?” As a wildlifer, my reply is, “How many of those (that you can see from the ground) can you afford to save?”

In the final analysis, wildlife in one form or another will get around to using every cavity tree available. And tree cutters, even if their objective is to save all cavity trees, will unwittingly fell some with holes that are not visible from the ground. Still others are felled because their location makes them a safety hazard. Of those that are saved as stand-alones in a cut over area, many are blown down within a few years.

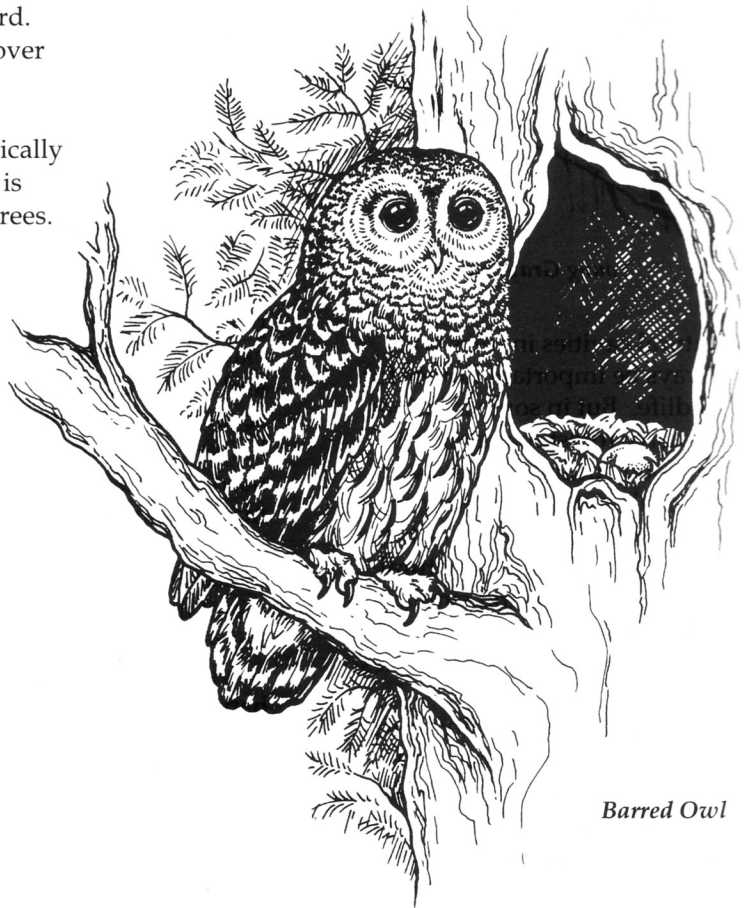
Even on public lands, tree felling operations typically remove 75 percent of all cavity trees. The result is that there’s a here-and-there shortage of cavity trees. This reduces the forest’s carrying capacity for wildlife.

Evidence that suggests a scarcity of suitable natural cavities is all around us. Every one of Pennsylvania’s three endangered mammals (the fisher, Indiana bat and Delmarva fox squirrel) use tree cavities. Northern Flickers and aggressive European Starlings compete for scarce cavities near clearings. Result: The Northern Flicker has sustained a steady decline since 1965. Bears that might have over-wintered high and dry in a large hollow tree are now forced to use underground dens. Result: Virtually every year some newborn cubs drown. The shortage of large, hollow trees has forced owls into barns, swifts into chimneys, and bats into houses. For the past

century, what bird species have had to rely on man-made “boxes” for much of their welfare? Answer: the Wood Duck, Eastern Bluebird, and Purple Martin. Place 50 bird boxes around a wetland, and 50 pairs of Tree Swallows are ready to move in. There’s a constant battle to keep flying squirrels, red squirrels and deer mice out of cabins and attics.

Man-made housing can help. But not every species can adapt to such housing. For these species, the right kind of cavity tree at the right kind of location is a must.

Bottom line for forest managers and woodcutters: after safety considerations, try to save most or all visibly evident live and dead cavity trees. Their useful life will be prolonged if they are saved in the company of other trees.



Barred Owl