

A New View of Dying Trees



Are you losing trees to the drought? If so, you might consider saving the biggest and strongest of them. These casualties of California's water shortage could actually deliver *some* consolation. When safely managed and in the right location, sizable dead trees add habitat value to a golf course. Because of their value to birds and wildlife, they are considered an asset when qualifying for Audubon's Cooperative Sanctuary Program. What's more, if the tree is given a well-deserved name such as, Wildlife Tree, and has a discreet sign that explains why it was not removed, you may convert a complaining golfer to one that complements you.

Not all dying trees can or should be allowed to remain in place. And let's be clear that we must never compromise safety to people or property. Never. However, if an arborist says the tree is safe to stand for some time, and you can accept it in its given location, give priority to those in riparian areas, near ponds and at habitat edges. Here are a couple of options to greatly reduce risk but still leave enough to benefit wildlife.

Top or shorten the tree if you need to. The taller the tree the better. But even six feet will do. Leave the largest branches in place, or if you must, shorten them. A branch at least 8" in diameter and 3' long is sufficient. It provides a preferred hunting perch (one with an unobstructed view), and it can accommodate a woodpecker's nest cavity.

After the woodpecker pair raises their family and abandons their home, it becomes available to other cavity-nesters. Which species use it depends on your region and the overall habitat quality of your golf course. The Tree Swallow, Western Bluebird, Mountain Chickadee and House Wren are candidates at the Aliso Viejo Country Club and Golf Course where I have been volunteering as a naturalist for six years. Shane Roth and Frank Tedescucci have been supportive superintendents of this practice there. I applaud them! In fact, some years ago Shane even "recruited" two highly distressed trees in a very remote area by drilling holes in them to hasten their demise. That's another great option.

Let's understand this is an investment for the future. It can take years for the tree to be suitable for a cavity-nester. However, in the meanwhile nesting and foraging insects will provide food for birds and pollinate plants. Even the tree's fungi will become a nesting site and food for other critters. That's only a snippet of the surprising story about dead trees.

Gillian Martin : GM99oliver@cox.net
cavityconservation.com
Signs available from website