HOW TO PROTECT WILDLIFE BEFORE REMOVING A DEAD TREE

There are Federal, State, and local regulations that protect wildlife. Dead trees (as well as living trees) can have cavities in which wildlife nest, roost or den, though dead trees have more cavities than live trees. Wildlife may be present in a cavity or tree defect at any time of the year. It can be difficult to tell if a cavity is occupied because we can't see inside. It is important to remove trees only if they have no active nests, or only in an emergency. Removal should be delayed until wildlife have left the nest. If an active nest is present in a dead (or live) tree that poses a human health and safety emergency, a Level 2 inspection by a Tree Risk Assessment Qualified Arborist is recommended. Prior to removing or relocating a tree with an active nest, a Wildlife Biologist and Certified Wildlife Rehabilitation Center should be contacted for guidance.

HOW TO DETERMINE IF A CAVITY IS ACTIVE.

1. Scan all sides of the trunk and limbs
2. Look for cavities as well as other areas of decay near cankers, broken treetops, branch breaks, and other points of injury, as well as stress cracks, and small round excavated holes made by woodpeckers.
3. Watch for agitated birds moving toward or away from you or vocalizing loudly and rapidly.
4. Listen for the incessant chirping of hungry baby birds from within the tree.
3. Step away to view the entire tree and observe the behavior of birds nearby; look especially for one that is perched and appears to be watching you.
5. Look for a bird carrying nesting material or insects in its bill or other prey.
7. If still uncertain, bang on the tree in multiple locations where cavities exist to see if a bird flushes from within.

Tree swallow nesting in woodpecker cavity
Photo by Jerry Millet

Western bluebird nesting Photo by Peggy Honda

Western screech-owl roosting Photo by Peggy Honda

Circles indicate cavities less than 6' above ground. Photo by Gillian Martin

A CAVITY IS MOST LIKLEY TO CONTAIN AN ACTIVE NEST IN THE FOLLOWING CIRCUMSTANCES

1. Between February and August (when most birds nest)
2. If the tree is in a riparian area or adjacent to a standing body of water
3. Where there is tree and vegetation diversity
4. In natural habitats with mature trees
5. When the tree is taller than 10’ and has some bark remaining
6. If the cavity/defect opening is 1 1/2” in diameter or greater
7. If there are bird droppings near the hole entrance or on limbs nearby, and if flies or other insects can be seen entering the cavity
8. If a woodpecker and other cavity-nesting species have been observed in the habitat

Resources

To find a certified arborist or Tree Risk Assessment Qualified arborist near you: TreesAreGood.org

To prevent harm to nesting wildlife during tree care: TreeCareForBirds.com

To find a Certified Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in California: https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Laboratories/Wildlife-Investigations/Rehab/Facilities

To find a Wildlife Biologist in California: https://treecareforbirds.com/find-a-wildlife-biologist/

To learn more about the habitat value of dead trees and how to support cavity nesting wildlife: CavityConservation.com

To view a decision model for converting a hazardous tree into a habitat tree: https://treecareforbirds.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Wildlife-Habitat-Tree-Decision-Model-9_2_19.pdf