

Holes In the Watershed by Gray Merriam

A recent study led by Canadian ecologists Kristina Cockle and Kathy Martin* underlines the fact that many species, birds and some mammals, often have their populations limited by availability of tree holes.

Many birds using tree holes for nesting and for overnight refuge, can't excavate holes, but depend on other species, such as the woodpeckers, to make holes for them.

We have lots of woodpeckers making lots of holes for other birds and animals, such as our chickadees, bluebirds, our flying squirrels, and our wood ducks. If we wish to supply tree holes that wildlife will use, this study showed that old trees with many holes are less important because they don't last. And the holes that we can see from the ground are the least likely to be used. The best holes, those that are well-used, and those that will last for years will be in living trees of the sizes that we normally harvest.



To maintain a supply of tree holes and the species that depend on them, we should maintain a diversity of tree species and tree diameters and the woodpeckers will do the rest. When trees die around your lot, let them decay gradually if they are not posing hazards.

*Wood duck nest hole 2011
photo: Gray Merriam*

* Cockle, Martin and Wesolowski, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, Sept. 2011