Snag Good Tree Care

Amble around Fairlington and you may see them: totem-like tree trunks bereft of their once-magnif- icent crowns and branches. These are not the latest fad in landscape design, but “snag trees.”

Snags, for short, play a crucial role in maintaining healthy natural forest systems that provide ben- efits to our turf, trees, plants and urban wildlife, as part of sustain- able landscaping practices.

The snags’ myriad benefits are due to the complex ecosystems they create and support for hun- dreds of organisms in the chain of life, ranging from microbes and fungus to insects and a raft of bird species.

Snags’ dead wood attracts lichens, mosses, and fungi which slowly break down the wood’s cellular structure, making it soft and spongy. This process of decay returns nitrogen, phosphorus, carbon, and other vital nutrients to the soil and the microorganisms living there, both enriching the soil and encouraging new seedlings to grow.

Beetle larvae and other insects bore into the dead wood, provid- ing a buffet for many birds and small mammals. Predator insects eat thousands of pest insects that would otherwise cause harm to living trees.

Frogs and salamanders use the detritus on the ground from decay- ing snags as cover and feast on ants and other insects attracted to the snag.

Snags are a magnet for North- ern Virginia’s eight species of woodpeckers, which drill cavities in the trunks for nesting. About 40 species of birds native to our region — including owls, Eastern bluebirds, crested flycatchers, and kestrels — use these same cavities for nests, as do bats. Flat-topped snags may attract open nester birds such as eagles.

The unseen benefits of these wooden sentinels are many. Their roots prevent soil from being washed away and help stabilize Fairlington’s hillsides. Dead roots offer infiltration channels for water to percolate down through the soil, which minimizes water runoff and erosion.

Safety is paramount, too. Care has been taken to remove branches and shorten trunks to eliminate the risk of damaging structures. Fairlington’s snags have been crafted by a licensed arborist and do not pose a threat to homes or residents from falling or insect activity.

*— Holly Wendelin, Grounds Committee member*