

Practical Advice for Tree Care and Wildlife

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Many of us have found careers as arborists because we are drawn to work outside in the natural world. Though our profession focuses on trees, we affect the wildlife that depend on trees. Arborists are constantly making difficult decisions that affect wildlife with very little guidance about how those decisions may affect wildlife populations in both the short and long term – ranging from operating loud machinery near an active nest to removing habitat. Arborists, biologists, and conservation groups are now coming together to help arborists understand how their decisions may affect wildlife.

I am involved in one such group in California: Tree Care for Birds and other Wildlife. We released a Best Management Practices (BMP) document that provides a framework for arborists to make responsible decisions about nesting wildlife and habitat management. Our work has been focused on the specific ecology and legal structure present throughout California, but I have seen evidence of parallel discussions in the Pacific Northwest, East Coast, Europe and Australia. Regional ecology and laws will change many of the specific recommendations for arborists dealing with wildlife. But there are many aspects of our BMP that can be used world-wide to help arborists make responsible decisions.

Learn about local laws and ecology.

Each area has separate laws dealing with protection of different wildlife. Some species are present year-round, and others are present for only a portion of the year. Local wildlife groups (such as Audubon in America) offer classes and free hikes with guides interested in spreading local wildlife knowledge. But most importantly, pay attention to the wildlife around you. Often there is more than you realize.

Gather contact information for a wildlife biologist and wildlife rehabilitator.

When unsure about whether tree care work will impact wildlife, a wildlife biologist may be able to advise how to best proceed. Wildlife rehabilitators have intimate knowledge of their local fauna and can advise when to bring the wildlife to a facility and when to let the wildlife care for themselves.

Is it the breeding season?

Most wildlife are relatively good at avoiding humans, but immature wildlife are confined to the nest for weeks or months and will die without its protection. In many parts of the world, wildlife can breed anywhere and anytime, but are more likely to have vulnerable young in the spring and summer. Areas closer to the equator tend to have longer breeding seasons, and areas closer to the poles tend to have shorter breeding seasons. In California, we generally consider February to August the breeding season.

What is the site's habitat value?

High value habitats are more likely to have wildlife present and nesting, and tree crews should work carefully when in high value habitats. In California, areas with high native plant diversity and low human disturbance, particularly riparian habitat (those near water), are considered high habitat value. City centers and highly urbanized areas tend to be lower value habitats.

Do a pre-work inspection and don't work near an active nest.

Before work begins at the site, look and listen for wildlife and signs of wildlife such as nests, droppings, etc. This doesn't need to take a long time or be a thorough survey unless required by law, policy, or ecology. Remain aware of wildlife throughout the job and be prepared to stop working and finish at a later date if you encounter a nest with eggs or nestlings. Tree care near an active nest has the potential to keep parents from caring for their young thereby putting the young at risk. Work can also startle immature birds into leaving the nest when they are not self-reliant. The BMPs have recommended typical distances for different species of birds. However, different species of wildlife have different sensitivities to disturbance, and your local wildlife biologists likely know the sensitivity of species in your area.

Consider wildlife habitat and engage clients in this discussion.

While the options to enhance habitat in urban forests are nearly limitless, the habitat that arborists have the most power to influence may be dead, dying and decaying trees and branches. Many species of wildlife depend on tree cavities or spaces behind loose bark for nesting, as well as on insects that live in decaying wood. I recommend only retaining trees with a risk rating lower than the property owner's risk tolerance and monitoring these trees over time. Once a tree is declining, manage trees to balance risk and wildlife habitat rather than tree health. Topping wildlife habitat trees or heading cuts on branches can reduce weight with little concern about introducing decay. Educational signs can be affixed to these trees to inform the public about conservation goals.

I encourage all arborists to start thinking about wildlife in their daily work with trees. While information on how tree care affects wildlife is not well known, several groups are creating helpful advice for our industry. My group's website (treecareforbirds.com) currently has a brief training video, an essential information flyer and the BMP document. We are developing additional training and resources that will be posted over time.



A pre-work inspection involves looking for wildlife, nests, and signs of wildlife throughout the project area. Illustrator Monica Edwards.



Many species of wildlife are reliant on dead, dying and decayed trees. This downy woodpecker has excavated a cavity nest in a dying branch. Illustrator Brian French.

Resources that I use regularly:

1. Law Information – Michigan State University publishes the website www.animallaw.info. While this site includes more than wildlife, they have helpful summaries of laws and lists of applicable laws by state.
2. Wildlife Biologist – Web search for “Consulting ecologist (geographic area)”.
3. Wildlife Rehabilitator – Web search for “Wildlife rehabilitator (geographic area)”.
4. Field Bird ID – I take classes, go on free hikes, and volunteer at my local [Audubon Society \(Golden Gate\)](#).
5. Bird ID Book – There are many available, I use the [Sibley Field Guide of Birds of Western North America](#). I also use the [Phone App](#) for bird songs.
6. Bird Information – The Cornell Lab of Ornithology publishes the website www.allaboutbirds.org. I find that it provides very helpful information about diet, nesting, behavior, etc. information for birds in a succinct, informative way.