

# FRIENDS OF FOREST HILL PARK

*The Forest Hill Park Post*



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[www.friendsofforesthillpark.org](http://www.friendsofforesthillpark.org)

## The Life in Dead Trees

Terry Krautwurst

“Snag” is the traditional forestry word for a standing dead, or partially dead, tree. Recently, though, biologists have adopted a more descriptive and deserving term: wildlife tree.

With the exception of living plants, probably no other single component of the woodland environment supports more animal life. In North America, about 85 species of birds, at least 50 mammal species, and roughly a dozen reptiles and amphibians rely on snags for shelter, food, mating, resting, nesting and other critical functions. In addition, dozens of invertebrates — millipedes, beetles, spiders, worms, ants and more — also call snags “home” (or at least “snack bar”). In all, says the U.S. Forest Service, some 1,200 forms of fauna rely on dead, dying or rotted-hollow trees.

So much for the “dead wood” notion.

It’s the insects, naturally, that attract many of the higher creatures. Drawn largely by the easy pickings at snags, hungry insectivores help control insect pests in the forest overall. But by far the greatest benefit of snags is the cavities — holes used for nests and shelter — that they foster. For many birds and animals, no better home exists than a hole in wood. Woodpeckers, chickadees, bluebirds, nuthatches, owls, wrens, tree swallows, raccoons, squirrels, bats, opossums, flying squirrels, porcupines — these are only a few of the species that require or prefer cavities. For them, a good snag is hole heaven.

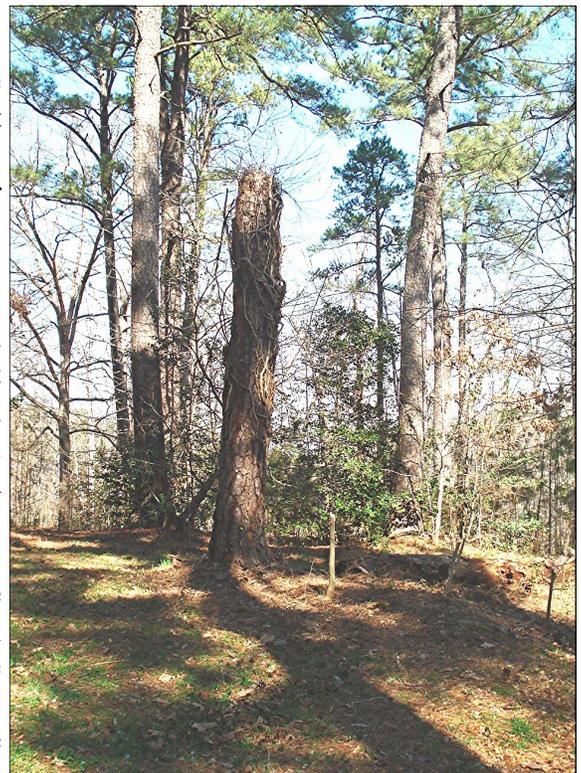
### Evolution of a Snag

Often, ironically, it is a cavity or the beginning of one that causes a snag-to-be’s demise. What sugar is to teeth, forest fungi are to wounded trees. Maybe it’s a lightning strike, a broken limb, a climbing bear’s dotted claw-scratch (ascending) or long-lined scrawl (descending).

Maybe it’s “Terry loves Laurel, 1972,” carved with passion if not thought into the smooth bark of a beech. For whatever reason, the bark barrier is broken, the door is opened and the spores come marching in. Fungi commence snacking, first releasing enzymes that break down the cellulose and lignin (an organic substance that binds the cellulose fibers) in the cell walls, then slurping up the nutrients. Heart-rot fungi invade and weaken the cores of the trunk or limbs; sap rots attack sapwood, destroying vital tissues, then spreading to the interior.

Trees produce defenses against fungi, so sometimes the damage is limited, and the tree prevails. But often the invasion is ongoing and simply too much. Already weakened, the tree becomes fair game for other nutrient-seekers: mosses, slugs, more fungi and — most of all — insects. Quite literally, the tree’s life is sucked away.

Meanwhile, among the birds who come to feast on insects are the cavity-makers. Chickadees, diminutive in both



This Forest Hill Park snag, though an unattractive tree specimen, is full of beneficial life.

body and beak, chip out nests in “soft” snags, those with weak, punky wood such as aspen and birch. Because these snags rot relatively quickly and attract insects in droves, they’re especially valuable as foraging trees.

Woodpeckers out-dig chickadees many times over, both in their ability to mine wood and in the number of cavities produced. Some 20 woodpecker species (including sapsuckers and flickers) breed in North America. All are equipped with chisel-like beaks for drilling and extra-thick, shock-absorbing skulls to keep their brains from scrambling.

Though a woodpecker will peck wood wherever there are buggy meals, it prefers to carve nests or roosts in “hard” snags. These are trees that have heart rot and are essentially intact on the outside, but soft and easily excavated on the inside. The resulting hard-shelled cavities make snug retreats and are, like the snags themselves, long-lasting. Among good hard-snag trees are sugar maple, elm, hickory, butternut, beech and black oak.

A typical woodpecker carves, or at least starts, numerous cavities in a season. Some are drilled merely as a come-on, part of a male’s courtship ritual to attract a female. Other cavities are created only as roosts. And in late summer and early fall, when young woodpeckers raised in the nest disperse, a new flurry of hole-making reverberates in the forest.

Blessed be these cavity-makers, for they not only create and use cavities, but sooner or later move on, allowing others to move in. The shelter is critical to the survival of countless creatures. Indeed, even many who can build their own homes prefer the woodpeckers’ more commodious digs. You’ve seen those bulky, leafy gray squirrels’ nests in the treetops? They’re the hovels of squirreldom, a last-ditch make-do when suitable cavities cannot be found. Survival of young squirrels in a leaf nest is barely more than half that of cavity-housed squirrels. Even chickadees, given the choice of custom-carving their own cavity or claiming a used woodpecker’s, find it a no-brainer. It’s the woodpecker hole for sure.

So goes life in and around a “dead” tree. A red-tailed hawk perches atop the snag’s highest point, scanning for prey. A snake about to shed its skin — a process that leaves it vulnerable — slithers into a cavity, safe. A tiny brown creeper weaves a nest of moss and twigs beneath a slab of loosened bark. A barred owl hunkers in a high hole, an opossum and bat share another, all waiting for their night-day to begin.

Most snags stand, dead but full of life, for decades. Even when the tree finally topples, it continues to nurture life. At first, propped partially by its branch stubs, the log makes a fine lean-to den for porcupines, foxes and black bears. Gradually, as soil organisms and fungi soften the wood, the trunk sags to the ground. Salamanders and lizards take up residence, attracted by the log’s cool, moist environment, and the insects and worms that crawl around it. White-footed mice burrow into the punky wood. Squirrels cache nuts in the loosened fibers.

Over time, the decomposing log sinks ever lower into the soil, slowly releasing its store of nutrients. Emerald mosses cling where bark once ruled. The fallen tree becomes a “nurse log,” providing a rich growing medium. Tiny plants sprout and thrive on the log’s wet wood-earth surface. Among them, almost always: tree seedlings stretching for the sun.

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Friends of Forest Hill Park

[www.friendsofforesthillpark.org](http://www.friendsofforesthillpark.org)

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# VCU

## Urban Planners Come to Forest Hill Park

Planning Studio Section 902 participants are taking a good, long look at Forest Hill Park to help them create a plan that could enhance park experiences now and in the future. Their primary client is city of Richmond Parks, Recreation and Facilities and their secondary client is Friends of Forest Hill Park.

Their initial visit was on January 15th when their ten-member team and Prof. James C. Smither walked through the park taking pictures and asking questions of FFHP and Parks and Recreation representatives. After another client meeting on February 12th, FFHP sponsored a community meeting at Forest Hill Presbyterian Church on February 23rd where stakeholder input was requested. That citizen engagement turned out more than 50 people who shared what the park means to them.



At the breakout sessions after the opening presentation, stakeholders used maps, markers and photos to express their vision of Forest Hill Park, today and twenty years from now. The planning team shared their ideas, which included art, music, enhanced water features and new plantings, among other things.

There will be two more client meetings—one in March and one in April—and the urban planners will present their final plan to FFHP and Parks and Recreation on May 7th.

On February 23rd, a river otter visited the lake in Forest Hill Park and entertained two-legged visitors with otter antics.



# Conservation Landscaping Workshop

**Saturday, March 23, 1:00 – 4:00 pm**

## **Stone House in Forest Hill Park**

Come and learn what you can do to make your landscape more sustainable and wildlife-friendly. Topics will include:

- Native plants and their vital role in healthy ecosystems
- Native plants of **local ecotype** vs. cultivars
- Conservation landscapes serve many purposes (e.g. wildlife habitat, ease of maintenance, improved water quality, aesthetics, carbon storage, saving money)
- Conservation landscapes are flexible
- Identification and removal methods for non-native invasive plants
- Considerations in selecting a site for conservation landscaping
- Site preparation to ensure success and minimize maintenance
- Resources to select the native plants that will work for your purposes

Establishment and maintenance of a successful conservation landscape: **PATIENCE**

The workshop will also include a walk in Forest Hill Park to identify common invasive plants and a hands-on demonstration of proper planting and mulching techniques.

**This workshop is FREE for members of Friends of Forest Hill Park and costs \$15 for non-members. All participants will receive a complimentary native plant from Reedy Creek Environmental and a free copy of “Native Plants for Virginia’s Capital Region”.**

**Advanced Registration is required.**

Registration information at: <http://www.friendsofforesthillpark.org/>



## **Register for The 2019 Forest Hill Spring Classic**

**SPONSORED BY THE FRIENDS OF FOREST HILL PARK AND VIRGINIA OUTSIDE**

### **ABOUT THE RACE:**

**WHAT:** Be a part of the Forest Hill Spring Classic, a series of mountain bike races and activities for ages 2-18:

- 4 and under Push/Balance bikes: 150 yards course with turns
- 6 and under Pedal bikes: 450 yards course with turns
- 12 and under Pedal bikes: Approx. 1.5 miles Trail course
- 18 and under Pedal bikes: Approx. 3 miles Trail course

**WHERE:** Forest Hill Park, 4021 Forest Hill Avenue, Richmond, VA 23225

**WHEN:** Sunday, April 7, 1-5 PM; Rain date, April 14, 1-5 PM

**TRAINING:** Three training rides and instructional sessions will be provided by Virginia Outside: Tuesdays, March 19, March 26, and April 2, 5:30-7 PM, Forest Hill Park; rain dates on Thursdays, March 21, March 28, and April 4. Indicate on the registration form which training sessions you will attend.

**SAFETY: ALL RACERS MUST WEAR A HELMET: NO EXCEPTIONS!!**

**FOOD:** Big Daddy's Barbecue, Kitchenette, Baskin-Robbins - bring a blanket and chairs for a family picnic.

**ENTERTAINMENT:** Face-Painting, Balloon Creations, and Unicyclist provided by Belton.

**RACE SUPPORT:** Provided by Virginia Outside at the tent near START/FINISH LINE

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## REGISTRATION:

**REGISTRATION:** Fee is \$25 (\$30 after March 31st) which includes training sessions and a tee shirt and other information in the registration pack.

**Online Registration** begins Feb. 1 and ends April 6 at midnight. Visit this site to register online:

<http://www.friendsofforesthillpark.org/spring-classic.html>

or

**Register by check/mail:** Download the registration form , complete and mail with a check to FFHP, P.O.Box 13161, Richmond, VA 23225

**Register in person** on April 6, 1-3 PM at the Stone House in Forest Hill Park or the day of the race, April 7, 10 AM to 12:30 PM, but T-shirt sizes may be limited, **NOTE from Virginia Outside:**

These races are designed to get new riders involved in the sport of cycling and are a Fun-based family event. Although these races will be timed, the purpose of this event is to Have Fun! And enjoy our wonderful park and its facilities. It also promotes being outside and meeting all of our neighbors in the community. All participants will receive a completion medal, and the top 3 in each category will receive awards and prizes (provided by Virginia Outside) which will be on display at the Virginia Outside tent the day of the race. Any proceeds from the race will go to Friends of Forest Hill Park to be used in the conservation and maintenance of our beautiful Forest Hill Park.