

BOREAL BITS

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IN PRAISE OF THE STUMP

'From each sad remnant of decay some forms of life arise.' Charles Mackay
(1814-1889)

Over the years a number of trees on our property, basically aspens, birch and jack pine, have succumbed to the rigors of boreal forest life and died. That's a sure signal to pull out the old chainsaw or Swede saw and cut up some firewood. Because our back yard is so rocky and sandy, it is impossible to cut the stumps below ground level without a great deal of work so we have left them where the forces of decay have eventually taken care of them. Our slothful behaviour has reaped many surprising and unintended rewards over the years.

Take the 'chair stump' for example. Our son downed that tree when he was visiting about five years ago. The jack pine had grown as tall as possible in the limited soil and had eventually died. When Doug cut it down he used the chainsaw to fashion it into a chair so one could view the world in comfort. I don't think we ever did but the thought was nice. Once a tree dies, the fungi and bacteria invade in earnest. They would have been kept at bay by the living organism but with the tree now dead there are no defences. A moist environment speeds the decomposition.

Whether carpenter ants had hastened the demise of the tree, I cannot recall but that carpenter ants took up residence in the decaying trunk, there can be no doubt. Carpenter ants are like humans with a penchant for carpentry; they don't eat the wood but they like to make homes out of it. This they accomplish by hollowing chambers. The ants are omnivorous and eat a great variety of both animal and plant foods, including honeydew from aphids, scale insects and other plant-sucking insects, plant juices, fresh fruits, living or dead insects, other small invertebrates, common sweets such as syrup, honey, jelly, sugar and fruit, and most kinds of meat, grease and fat. Unlike termites, they cannot digest wood cellulose. Essentially, by leaving stumps around the yard, we are



creating habitat for carpenter ants. And as it turns out, this has been a good thing.

As wildlife watchers, Pat and I are amazed at how much action our stumps have created. Of course, the odd bear has come into the yard and taken a swipe at the rotting stumps, but these incidents have been rare.

All three of our most common woodpeckers have worked the chair stump at different times. The big ones, the crow-size pileateds—pronounced pill-ee-aye-teds or pie-lee-aye-teds—have chiseled the thing to pieces, opening up the interior for the smaller woodpeckers, the hairies and downies. Even the flickers, usually ground

foragers, have taken a turn on the stump.

This past year has been hard on the old stump. With the woodpeckers taking their turns, the ants continuing their excavations and the fungi, bacteria and mosses reclaiming nutrients, the stump is disappearing before our eyes. Soon only a nub will be left and soon we'll relegate this to the compost pile and turn our attention to other stumps. The secret of a good wildlife stump seems to be moisture. I ran across a stump in the bush caused by a blow down. The remainder of the tree is gone the way of decay but the

stump remains due to the fact that it is on a small promontory that allows no moisture to collect, hence no habitat for the agents of decomposition is created.

Right now there is very little left of the stump chair, but we have many other stumps to attract the woodpeckers and we allow a few dead trees to remain standing providing they don't present a risk to people, dogs or buildings. Alex Chapil decided to leave a large dying birch in his front yard and was treated to a family of flickers that excavated a cavity and raised a family.



It is the way of humans to alter the environment and most times these alteration are to the detriment of wildlife. But there is a balance and although it weighs in favour of the humans, our yards can be wildlife friendly.

(Photos – P. Burke)