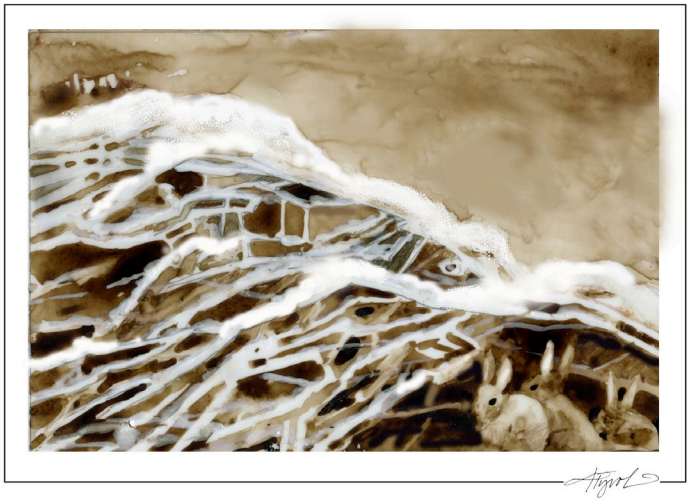
The Outside Story



Life Within the Brush Pile

By: Lee Emmons

For nearly a decade, I've been adding to a brush pile in the woods behind my home. A depository of pruned branches, dead flowers, discarded logs, old leaves, and an occasional Christmas tree, the pile is a decaying testament to seasons and chores long past. Over the years, the pile has settled a bit as the accumulated debris has slowly broken down. Yet, the brush pile remains as intended: a woody oasis for wildlife.

"Wildlife uses brush piles for nesting, resting, evading predators, keeping cool during summer, and staying warm and dry when it's cold and stormy," Charles Fergus wrote in his book *Make a Home for Wildlife: Creating Habitat on Your Land Backyard to Many Acres*. Constructed brush piles replicate what happens on the forest floor when dead branches and trees build up in a given spot. These unremarkable (at least to the human eye) heaps offer critical cover for forest creatures, and Fergus notes that brush piles are utilized by different species, including rabbits, turtles, weasels, chipmunks, and squirrels.

In the winter, various small animals will use brush piles to find sufficient warmth and cover, said Haley Andreozzi, the wildlife outreach program manager with the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. These smaller animals, in turn, attract predators such as foxes, fishers, and long-tailed weasels. Tracks left in the snow will help identify the different creatures that enter and exit the pile.

Doug Hitchcox, a staff naturalist with Maine Audubon, said brush piles are also valuable real estate for birds. He noted several species will use brush piles at different times of the year, including sparrows, some warblers, like common yellowthroat, and a variety of wrens, including house, winter, or Carolina wrens. Although the main benefit of brush piles to birds is cover and shelter, some may try to nest within the pile. "Winter wrens and a couple of species of flycatchers will often build their nests in the roots of uprooted trees," said Hitchcox. "So a brush pile might mimic that enough to be an enticing nesting location."

If built near an existing bird feeder, especially one without adequate natural cover nearby, a brush pile may attract more avian visitors. “If you don’t have trees or shrubs already near the feeder, a brush pile is a great option to give birds a quick get-away spot,” said Hitchcox.

Brush piles are easy to construct at the edges of forests, fields, and gardens. Recently cleared or altered areas also provide excellent sites. To start, simply place a base of logs on the ground. Rocks or an existing tree stump can also serve as the pile’s foundation. Add multiple layers of branches and smaller sticks, and eventually, you’ll have a dome-shaped pile with numerous hiding spots for small animals. Leaves and other forms of vegetation will provide insulation as well as natural covering. There should be room left at the bottom to allow animals to come and go.

Andreozzi said that while any type of woody debris will support wildlife habitat, “a deliberately structured brush pile will provide habitat for a larger diversity of species and will last longer.” She suggests building multiple brush piles in areas without natural cover to ease the threat posed by predators.

Since I started on my first brush pile, I’ve added another on a different corner of the property. Smaller than the main pile, it grows slowly after each windstorm and yard job. Located just past the compost and near a grouping of large oaks, the pile has already attracted the attention of a few critters.

On cold winter nights, as ice-covered trees sway in the wind, and snow coats the forest floor, I hope small creatures have reached the warmth and safety of my brush piles – and that when a new day dawns, the old branches and rotting wood have sustained a most precious gift: life.

Lee Emmons is a nature writer, public speaker, and educator. The illustration for this column is by Adelaide Murphy Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: www.nhcf.org.

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