



Friends of Thatcher State Park

Emma T Thacher Nature Center • 87 Nature Center Way • Voorheesville, NY 12186
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The Secret Life of Dead Trees

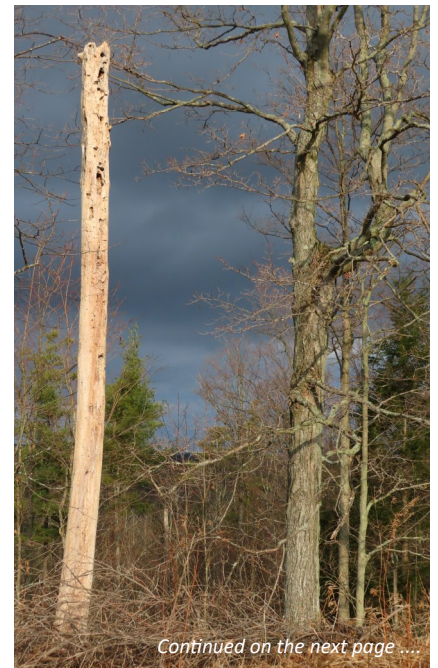
With the widespread devastation caused by Asian Longhorned Beetles and Emerald Ash Borers, dead trees have been appearing more frequently in our forests — noticeable even more now that the world is greening again. I appreciate living trees as much as anyone - but there's a certain beauty to those skeletal, leafless remains that fascinates me. Each is unique, and as they slowly decay, they almost seem to take on a life of their own. In fact, while they may be leafless, they are far from lifeless; as we'll see, dead trees support an astonishing amount of life!

But first, some terminology: a standing dying or dead tree is called a 'snag' - classified into several stages depending on how far gone it is. Once a snag topples, it becomes a 'log'; the remaining stump is, well, a 'stump'. Some trees are felled suddenly by a chainsaw, or they are uprooted by a storm, becoming logs and stumps in an instant. But many die more slowly—the snags you see stretching bleached limbs to the sky, often with a raptor perched on top.

Regardless of whether you find dead trees beautiful or not, they play a fundamental role in supporting forest

ecosystems and preserving biodiversity. For one thing, decaying wood provides shelter and food for a wide variety of organisms. Trees, like most plants, have plenty of chemical and mechanical weapons against infestation and disease, but these weaken as a tree ages. Invasive species like the Emerald Ash Borer cause such devastation because our native trees have not evolved defenses against them. Once a tree's defenses are breached, its enormous amount of organic matter quickly becomes a smorgasbord for those organisms that appreciate a woody meal. Insects – beetles, termites, ants – often move in first, tunneling through the wood and leaving convenient roadways for other organisms. Fungi and bacteria follow. These microbes are able to break down cellulose and lignin - the hard parts of plants not digestible by animals without microbial help. The softened wood, and the growing microbes, are eaten by other invertebrates, who in turn attract birds, spiders, reptiles, and mammals to the feast.

Among the birds, woodpeckers (downy, hairy, and red-bellied, along with sapsuckers) are the most conspicuous visitors to snags. As they hammer away in search of insects,



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they are not only audible, but they leave large holes. They also create nesting and roosting cavities which are used by many other birds. In North America, about 85 species of cavity-nesting birds use snags for nesting, roosting, or feeding, including more than 35 species in the Northeast alone. Think of all those birds attracted to birdhouses, plus those that prefer natural tree cavities. In addition to birds, many mammals such as bats, squirrels, raccoons, and porcupines use these cavities. Often, parts of the tree tenaciously hang on to life, putting out a smattering of leaves each year, while trunk and most limbs are pockmarked by destruction.

Eventually though, the relentless work of bacteria, fungi, invertebrates and woodpeckers damages the wood so much that the snag topples and becomes a log or stump. As it begins a new phase of 'life' on the forest floor, a parade of different characters appears: Photosynthesizers like lichens and mosses colonize the wood. Earthworms, millipedes, slugs, and springtails etc. get their fill of rotting wood and fungal hyphae. Salamanders and other amphibians often shelter under logs, where they find humid conditions and lots of invertebrates to eat. They are joined by chipmunks

and mice, and the occasional snake. But logs serve other functions as well. As the rotting wood is slowly decomposed, carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus are returned to the soil, ready to feed the next generation of forest plants. They also serve as nurse logs for bush and tree saplings, influence forest microclimate, and can help prevent erosion of forest soil.

Removing dead trees can lead to a measurable decline in biodiversity: Where it has been studied, the trend is clear; forests with more deadwood support a greater variety of life. Fortunately, this role is now more widely appreciated. In recent decades, forest management has begun to view dead trees less as hazards or waste, and more as valuable contributors to biodiversity and forest health.

So next time you see a snag, log, or stump in the forest, whether at Thacher Park or elsewhere, slow down, and take a closer look ... and consider the tremendous amount of life it still houses, and the essential work it continues to do.

- by Christine Gervasi



Photos of a selection of local snags, stumps, and logs on this and previous page by Christine Gervasi.

Join board meetings virtually!

The Friends Board meets every second Wednesday of every second month. Anybody is welcome at our board meetings and we'd love to have you there! Can't join us in person? Join our Microsoft Teams meetings virtually using this link/QR code! [Friends Group Bi-Monthly Board Meeting | Meeting-Join | Microsoft Teams](#)



The Friends of Thacher Park Meeting Dates for 2026
Wednesday, May 13, July 8, September 9, November 11.
7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center. Come join us!

Join Us for the 2026 Native Plant Sale

**May 26 at 10:00 am at
Thacher State Park—Pear Orchard**

Nearly all the plants at the sale will be native to New York, though a few are not technically native but have naturalized, are well behaved, and great for wildlife. All plants will be straight species that have grown here for centuries, rather than nativars or cultivars. Prices will range from \$5 for a small pot to \$75 for a more established specimen. The annual event is a co-presentation of Wild Ones Capital Region NY, Friends of Thacher State Park, and the Emma Treadwell Thacher Nature Center, with proceeds benefitting Wild Ones and the Friends of Thacher.



There will be over 2,500 plants for sale. A list of these plants will be posted on the Wild Ones of the Capital Region's website closer to the sale (<https://capitalregionny.wildones.org/thacher-plant-sale/>).

There will be several changes in the sale this year.

1. Home Earth Alliance will be joining us at the sale with plants for sale from the "IMAGINE Native Plant Farm" in Glenmont, NY. A nonprofit program of Home Earth Alliance, IMAGINE Native Plant Farm specializes in growing straight native species from wild seed responsibly collected in the ecoregions that comprise the greater Capital Region.
2. Food Truck: Plated Platte with breakfast burritos and sandwiches will be present.
3. Staggered Entry: when you first arrive at the site you will take a ticket. When the sale begins, the first 20 to 30 tickets will be let into the site. We will then let in groups every 5 to 10 minutes to keep the site from being as crowded as it has been in past years.

When you arrive at the sale, please get a number and then visit the food truck and the tables. We look forward to seeing you!

- by *Betsey Miller*

Party Like it's Earth Day 2026!



The Friends of Thacher State Park participated in a 2026 Earth Day Block Party in Albany on April 18. The event on Grand Street drew a large crowd and included dozens of community organizations, local food, music, and sustainability resources.

Throughout the afternoon there was a steady flow at the Friends table, staffed by Laure-Jean Davignon, Jill Harbeck and Madeline Kennedy. Attendees stopped by to learn about activities at the Park and the Nature Bus, which CDTA will start running on May 30.



Information about the Friends of Thacher Park and its newsletter, which includes a Thacher Park activities calendar with mailed subscriptions, is available at <https://www.friendsofthacherpark.org/>.



Thacher Park activities are also posted at <https://parks.ny.gov/visit/state-parks/thacher-state-park#events>.



More information on the Nature Bus will be forthcoming on CDTA's website at <https://www.cdta.org/nature-bus>.

- by *Jill Harbeck*



Photo shows (left to right) Friends board member Jill Harbeck, Friends president Laure-Jeanne Davignon, and board member Madeline Kennedy.

Check for updates at www.friendsofthacherpark.org

Officers of the Friends Board of Trustees

President:	Laure-Jeanne Davignon	(518) 578-4718
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Bert Schou	(518) 221-8693	John Kilroy	(518) 872 -1501
Madeline Kennedy		Jill Harbeck	
Laura McCarthy		Jesse Grayson	

As always, call (518) 872-0800 or (518) 872-1237 to verify activity times and dates.

Please feel free to call board members with questions or suggestions.

Many thanks to Betsey Miller, Jill Harbeck, Laure-Jeanne Davignon, Mike Nardacci, and Becky Schneider for their contributions to this newsletter.
— Christine Gervasi (Editor)

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<https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/>

Wednesday, May 13, 2026

Next:

Board Meeting

7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center

Caves and Karst Field Trip

While the Thacher Park area is famous for its Paleozoic paleontology, this section of the Helderberg Plateau is also widely known as classic karst terrain, and I have designed a bi-weekly field trip that allows visitors to explore the karst features.

The program begins at the Visitor Center at the popular karst model. Situated next to the series of panels that explain how the various strata (rock layers) formed, the model is used to explain how the bedrock limestone evolves into karst. Limestone is made of calcium carbonate precipitated from seawater by ancient creatures and compacted into rock from their skeletons and shells. Calcium carbonate will dissolve in the mild carbonic acid made from rain and puddles of water on the ground which absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Sinking into the ground, the acidified waters produce extensive natural conduits that we call caves. Visitors are introduced to terms naming karst features - grikes, sinkholes, karst aquifers - following which we travel in a caravan to three other stops.

First is the overlook near the LaGrange Bush picnic area offering a cross-section of the Escarpment and the major limestone strata which compose it. At its base are small caves from which flows water that enters the ground in sinkholes west of the Escarpment.

The next stop is on Beaver Dam Road, bordered by numerous sinkholes. These take water from strata of sandstone and shale which rise in steep hills above them.

The final stop is on a section of the Blue Trail along which are numerous shallow grikes running in long lines and allowing acidified water to sink into the earth. Many unique flowers and other plants grow in and between them.

It has been said that an entire course in karst geology could be taught in and around Thacher Park and this field trip is an introduction to this fascinating subject.

- by Mike Nardacci

As always, you can find a color version of the newsletter at www.friendsofthacherpark.org