

Natures Garbage Disposal Service
by Vicki Williams

Have you ever thought about what the woods would look like if all the leaves, branches, acorns, animal scat (poop), dead animals and insects just continually piled up? It wouldn't be a very pleasant place to visit, that is for sure! We would literally be buried in – “stuff”.

Nature has its own way of dealing with “stuff”. Everything is recycled very efficiently using two distinct methods – by scavengers and decomposition.

Scavengers are animals that eat anything, dead or alive, that they can find. It is much easier to eat something dead than catch a live meal. Opossums, raccoons, vultures, crows and foxes are just a few of the mammals that eat carrion. Also, there are many insects, such as beetles and maggots, which are happy to partake in the feast.

Maybe you haven't actually thought about it before, but you very seldom find small dead animals and insects in the woods. No mice, birds, voles, dragonflies. Occasionally you see the remains of large animals such as deer, opossum, and rabbits because they are bigger and it takes longer for their remains to be recycled (i.e. disposed of).

Before wildlife rehabilitators release an opossum back into the wild, they have to “test” that the animal will really be able to live in the wild successfully. One of the tests is giving the opossum a dead animal and seeing if it will eat it. If it does, the rehabilitated opossum is ready to be released. We should all be more grateful than we are that opossums do inhabit our neighborhoods!

Recently, I had a scavenger visit my yard. I saw a very sick chickadee during the day and later saw it on the ground. The next morning I could tell that a raccoon had eaten it because I found feathers in the birdbath and there were a few partial remains nearby. Within a few days, the rest of the remains were gone because ants, beetles, and other insects came along and finished it off. The thought of a scavenger eating dead animals may sound disgusting, but it is all part of the food chain. Scavengers are performing a vital task and acting as ‘street sweepers’.

The process of breaking down organic material into simpler substances is called decomposition. We humans think of decomposition as a “cleaner” process and associate it more with plant matter (as well as scat) than we do with dead animals. Decomposing animals create a much stronger emotional reaction when encountered.

Amazingly, recent research, particularly in old-growth forests, has shown that decomposing trees on the forest floor actually contain more living matter than live standing trees! This is true because of all the different organisms busily at work turning the organic matter into fuel and energy, and eventually into soil to support new plant life. The dead tree is full of ants, worms, beetles, mites, grubs, fungi and bacteria, all busily breaking down the wood to get the nutrients that are locked up in it.

If you have a log pile at home, just leave it for a few years and watch it decay. As it slowly decomposes, it becomes a very interesting pile. The longer it decays the more the birds love digging around in it, looking for worms, beetles, grubs and ants. They kick the smaller pieces around, which hastens the decomposition process in the log pile. If you understand how intertwined all parts of the natural world are and the different steps/links in the food chain, you can watch nature at work without getting quite as upset.

One of my favorite food chain memories is from a Wild Wednesday program at Sweetwater Creek State Park. It was the end of summer and the yellow jackets were out and about. Yellow jackets are omnivores, meaning they will eat anything, including the remains of a crushed caterpillar or other insect. One year we had a mortally wounded caterpillar on a Wild Wednesday walk and watching it being eaten by yellow jackets fascinated the children who had come along. Of course, we had to take some precautions to keep the young naturalists from becoming yellow jacket victims!

It is so much easier to appreciate the beautiful flowers and trees, the gurgling streams and singing birds, than the slow and quiet decomposers. However, I think we may need to revise our opinion of what is good and wonderful in nature. Even though it is difficult, we have to admit we owe a debt of gratitude to opossums, raccoons, yellow jackets, fungi, and bacteria!