

# Hazard Trees

By Mike Dawson

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Two recent events have brought an important safety issue to the attention of A.T. clubs and the Appalachian Trail Conference.

The first occurred in September 1989, after Hurricane Hugo left the Trail through southwestern and central Virginia strewn with fallen trees (many of them weak and hollow) that made the Trail virtually impassable. In terms of structural damage, the Trail was relatively fortunate. Several huge trees fell between the shelter and the privy on Glade Mountain near Groseclose, Va., but the buildings were unscathed. The privy at Pine Swamp Shelter on Peters Mountain wasn't so lucky: It took a direct hit from a huge oak that reduced the building to splinters.



**Members of the Connecticut Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club inspect the damage to the Limestone Springs Shelter.**

The second incident occurred May 17, 1991, when the Limestone Springs Shelter in Connecticut was hit by a 60-foot ash during a rainstorm with high winds. Fortunately, the shelter was a solid, well-built lean-to, designed (using the model developed by the Maine A.T. Club) to withstand heavy snow loads. The falling tree cracked the ridgepole and woke a hiker asleep in the shelter. Unharmed, the hiker decided to remain inside the shelter for the rest of the night instead of sleeping out in the rain. Subsequent inspection by members of the Connecticut Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club revealed that the tree was partially hollow and partially filled with dry rot, despite its outwardly healthy appearance.

Which trees are appropriately considered "hazard trees" in a backcountry environment such as the Appalachian Trail? I would define them as weakened, dead, hollow, or unstable trees that could present a hazard to hikers if or, more accurately, when they fall. Yes, it is unreasonable, undesirable, and unnecessary to remove every tree that could fall on the Trail. Indeed, snags and large, hollow trees are an important resource for the permanent residents of the forests that we visit. Many wildlife managers call these den trees, not hazard trees.

So, if you find a 12-ton oak leaning over a shelter, and it appears hollow or shows signs of rot, it's probably time to act. These are often the most delicate of felling jobs, however, requiring skill and experience. Don't hesitate to call upon your agency partners or ATC for assistance and advice. Also remember that, even if a tree is generally sound, dead or broken limbs or tops can be just as dangerous, hence their vernacular name, widow-makers. These limbs and

tops often can be pruned out or broken off without removing the entire tree.

We might pay extra attention to our older overnight sites. Although the consciousness of hikers has been raised remarkably in the past 20 years, many of our sites still may have several dead or damaged trees from carvers and camp-ax wielders. And, as the gypsy moth continues its onslaught on the eastern forests, whole forest canopies are being affected.

Those potential hazards also should be taken into account when planning a new overnight-use site. It is far easier to remove hazardous trees before structures are built than afterward.

I would like to concentrate on an area of particular concern: hazard trees in designated or developed overnight-use sites. People tend to spend a great deal of time in these areas--as a matter of fact, we encourage them to do so by designating them as overnight sites, by depicting their locations on maps and in guidebooks, and by offering shelter from the elements. Hikers congregate in these areas and usually spend eight hours or more, in contrast to a spot on the Trail that a hiker passes in a moment's time. This needs to be taken into account in our efforts to provide a reasonably safe environment for the public.

*Mike Dawson is ATC regional representative for central and southwest Virginia. An article on methods for identifying hazard trees will appear in a future issue of The Register.*