



Feeding Waterfowl Information Handout

Five reasons why feeding waterfowl are harmful

People often feed waterfowl. They can be seen feeding food scraps to ducks, gulls, geese, or swans at local beaches or ponds. What they do not realize is that feeding these animals is detrimental to the birds and the environment in many significant ways. Please read on to learn more about the harmful effects of feeding waterfowl.

Birds have amazing survival skills

Waterfowl have an incredible ability to survive and avoid harsh weather conditions. They can migrate thousands of miles south to a warmer climate for the winter where food is abundant or simply endure the harsh weather in northern areas. For all waterfowl, the abundance of naturally occurring food and the quality of their diet are the main driving forces behind the birds' ability to survive.

Food quality is critical

Waterfowl require proper nutrition to survive Midwest winters. The diet of a young bird during its first year of life must be high in essential fats, proteins and nutrients to ensure proper development. Adults need a nutrient rich diet to replace feathers and recondition their bodies after migration and during breeding cycles. People unknowingly harm waterfowl by hand feeding food that is low in nutritional value.

High nutrition foods include:

- Insects
- Submerged aquatic plants
- Grasses

Low nutrition foods include:

- Bread
- Popcorn
- Crackers
- Pastries

Problems associated with feeding waterfowl include: malnutrition, disease, dependency, water pollution and environmental degradation. Nothing we can feed them is healthy enough for their diet. This includes cracked corn. Only wildlife professionals should be feeding wildlife.

Each problem is described below in detail.

1

Malnutrition

Through evolution wildlife species have developed skills to obtain food that contains the essential nutrients needed

When people feed waterfowl

- Waterfowl can become concentrated in small urban environments that are not capable of supporting large flocks.
- Waterfowl may become malnourished and risks of disease increase.
- Birds can become nuisance animals at feeding sites and other areas where they congregate.
- Unnatural concentrations of waterfowl can cause overgrazing and erosion, which may be undesirable for other species.
- High concentrations of fecal coli form bacteria contribute to unsanitary conditions and to closures of beaches.

to survive, reproduce and live a healthy life. These skills help maintain a balance between the animals and their natural habitat. This balance is compromised by hand feeding, which is physically harmful to birds and is one of the primary causes of malnutrition. Malnutrition is caused by the types of food that people hand feed to the birds. Bread and crackers don't provide the necessary energy and nutrients for proper health, and energy is wasted in digesting these foods. Birds become dependent upon humans because the animals must eat more of these poor quality foods to make up the difference.

Malnutrition leads to:

- Low energy and muscle deterioration
- Development of deformed wings in young birds
- Loss of flight later in life
- Lowered ability to avoid predators
- Decrease in successful reproduction
- Lower life expectancy

2

Dependency

Waterfowl, Particularly Canada geese and mallards, will congregate in areas with abundant food and space.

Unfortunately, feeding can cause birds to become concentrated in small urban areas that are incapable of supporting large numbers of birds. The birds then become dependent upon humans for food and can become nuisance animals. Some species can become aggressive and may need to be removed.



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Dependence upon humans for food causes:

- Loss of their natural fear of humans, which creates aggressive behavior
- Concentration of birds near highways and airports, potentially causing motor vehicle and airplane accidents
- Overpopulation around small wetlands and ponds
- Delay or halting of migration to natural wintering sites.

3

Disease

Lowered nutrition and overpopulation allow disease to spread more quickly, potentially infecting thousands of birds with fatal diseases such as Avian

Cholera, Duck Plague, Avian Influenza and Avian Botulism. Although these diseases have always existed in waterfowl populations, the risks increase when bird populations become concentrated at feeding sites.

4

Environmental degradation

Waterfowl naturally congregate in wetlands, when and where natural

foods are plentiful. However, when hand feeding occurs, the over concentration of birds may ultimately cause overgrazing and degradation to the landscape.



High concentrations of birds cause:

- Overgrazing of vegetation leading to soil erosion.
- Degradation of the landscape making it undesirable for other species and unsightly for humans.

5

Water pollution

People will often feed waterfowl at the local pond or at the beach. This not only causes a nuisance situation with birds begging for and stealing food, but also contributes significantly to water pollution in the form of fecal coli bacteria. High levels of fecal coliform bacteria in the water will cause beach closures and affect the enjoyment of our local waters.



Feeding the birds can:

- Cause gulls to be a nuisance by begging and stealing food and garbage.
- Contributes to beach closures.
- Cause unsanitary conditions due to large quantities of bird feces.

What can you do to help?

Don't feed the birds!

Waterfowl will take food that is easily available. No food is appropriate for us to feed waterfowl. It is better for the health of the birds, humans and the environment to not feed geese, ducks, swans, and gulls in any way.

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