

Dangers and consequences of feeding wildlife

People who feed wildlife almost always have good intentions but are unaware of the long and short-term consequences of providing supplemental food. Examples of places in the SF Bay Area where people habitually feed wildlife: Palace of Fine Arts-SF, Stow Lake-SF, Lake Merced-SF, Marin Civic Center, Lake Merritt-Oakland, parking lots at fast food restaurants.

Feeding wildlife creates:

Loss of foraging skills

- Feeding wildlife is especially dangerous for young animals that become dependent on humans for food and may not learn to hunt and forage on their own. This may lead to starvation, which is a cruel death sentence.
- If you are feeding, taper off the amount of food you are supplying to avoid desperate, panicked wildlife, and give them time to adapt. Depending on the species, that may mean 8-12 weeks or even longer. This allows wildlife to relearn how to forage for natural foods and will help prevent conflicts with others.

Loss of fear of humans/habituation

- Fed raccoons and coyotes may frequent decks, and approach people, cats and small dogs
- Habituation often leads to heartbreak: Someone will find and raise a wild baby and then bring the animal to a wildlife rehabilitator asking if he or she can be wilded up and released. The answer is almost always no. That animal has not been taught to avoid humans and has more than likely been fed an improper diet (see next point).

Inadequate nutrition

- Supplemental food provided to wildlife very rarely consists of the natural foods wildlife would find while foraging. This can lead to malnutrition and oddly enough, even emaciation.
- Bread fed to ducks and waterfowl can lead to “angel wing” aka “slipped wing” or “crooked wing.” This condition causes the last joint of the wing to twist which results in a bird’s primary/flight feathers sticking out. Angel wing prevents affected birds from flying, which means they cannot escape predators (including people) and cannot migrate. The primary cause of angel wing is too much protein, although it can also be genetic. A natural diet prevents this condition which can sometimes be fixed in rehabilitation.
- White bread causes a deficiency of Vitamin E in birds. A natural diet of leaves, seeds and aquatic plants provides a high level of Vitamin E.
- Ducklings and goslings may be fed tremendous amounts of bread in urban and suburban areas
- Growing baby birds may fail to get the proper nutrients for healthy growth and development

Spread of disease

- Wildlife is opportunistic and will take advantage of the most convenient food source available.
- Feeding leads to higher concentrations of animals and interaction with other species. In these higher population concentrations, diseases spread more rampantly, examples: salmonella, distemper and trichomoniasis.
- Competition for free and easy food can also lead to aggression between animals.

Interference with migratory patterns

Seasonal changes in food supplies are one of the things that signal to animals that it is time to migrate. Canada Geese, gulls, even some songbirds may not migrate if supplemental food is available.

- This increases competition for food for exhausted animals migrating through

Disturbs natural balance and leads to overpopulation

- In the wild, the number of animals being born is directly related to the amount of natural food available to the parents. The number of young that survive will also depend on how much food is available which is nature's way of balancing populations when availability of natural foods cannot support larger numbers.
- Overpopulation leads to more competition for food which can lead to aggression between animals.

Loss of biodiversity and destruction of habitat

- Wildlife has learned how to thrive amongst people and many animals have become overpopulated in urban areas, including rats, pigeons, gulls, raccoons, skunks and opossums.
- Loss or degradation of habitat has accounted for 88% of the endangered or threatened animals listed in the US. However, some species thrive among people and have become overpopulated in urban areas.

Creates nuisance wildlife

- Consider for a moment what happens when the feeder is away, moves or stops feeding?
- Fed wildlife will identify people as a source of free and easy food and may even approach people for handouts. When others are not as tolerant about wildlife visiting the area, this may result in serious consequences and potentially a cruel death for the animal.

Notes

Trapping and relocating (even with live cage traps like Havahart™) is NOT an effective or humane method for solving conflicts with wildlife. Relocating wildlife creates orphans, is inhumane and is illegal in California. 50-75% of relocated animals die of starvation, dehydration and injuries sustained from territory disputes. There is no guarantee the captured animal is the actual animal causing the conflict.

Most people that feed wildlife think they are doing the animals a kindness. Certainly the animals respond eagerly to hand-outs, and for many people, feeding is their opportunity to see wildlife up close. Most people who feed also think that the small amount of food they hand out won't make a difference, not realizing that dozens of other people come to the same conclusion, so the animals are actually eating a diet primarily made up of human foods.

Illegal to feed wildlife

California Code of Regulations Title 14, section 251.1

Local ordinances prohibiting the feeding of wildlife:

San Francisco Park Code Sec. 5.07.(b)

Marin County Ordinance 8.04.226

City of Berkeley Ordinance No. 7,356-N.S.