

Truth and Consequences

Artificial feeding of wildlife can have some unintended consequences.



Jeff Vanuga/NRCS Photo



By Patrick McCurdy

It is evident from the millions of dollars spent annually by wildlife watchers and hunters that feeding wildlife is a common practice. A 2001 study conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that 605,000 West Virginia residents and visitors participate in wildlife viewing as a hobby and spend \$15,041,000 annually on equipment and wildlife feeding. These figures do not include hunters that feed to attract wildlife into their hunting areas. What may seem like an innocent practice sometimes has a negative effect on wildlife communities.

I learned one of the negative realities of wildlife feeding in a harsh way early in my career with the DNR. I was employed as the park naturalist at Twin Falls Resort State Park in Wyoming County and spent my time during the summer months conducting interpretive programming for park guests. Despite my

efforts to teach the negative effects of feeding wildlife, a few people insisted on regularly feeding white-tailed deer in the park campground. The fact that this practice was illegal in state parks still didn't deter the feeders. Feeding reached a peak during the summer of 1992. Although no one would feed the deer in the

Years of artificial feeding had made the deer less able to find food on their own and to survive the harsh conditions that winter often brings.

presence of park officials and violators were difficult to catch, it was obvious that feeding was a common practice because the deer would run to the road side at the sound of a familiar vehicle or toot of the horn. It was also difficult for a child to walk across the campground with

a bag of chips or other snack without being accosted by deer that were programmed to recognize a possible handout.

Illegal feeding continued through fall into winter until abruptly halted by a blizzard in January 1993 that dumped 30 inches of snow on the park. Access to the park campground on Bower Ridge was blocked for several days. When the snow finally melted, the harsh reality of the previous fall's feeding activity was evidenced by the countless number of deer lying dead along the campground road. Years of feeding had created an artificially high deer population, which had depleted the habitat. Feeding had also resulted in deer that had become accustomed to being fed and less aggressive in searching for food. These factors combined to create an

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DNR Photos



Examples of deer feeding in West Virginia include, clockwise from left: an apple pile in Pendleton County; a bait feeder; and a corn pile in Hardy County.

unnecessary die-off.

I will be the first to acknowledge that many areas of our state experienced a high deer mortality from the January 1993 storm. However, I often wonder how many of the deer on Bower Ridge would have survived the storm if they would have spent the previous summer and fall building a good fat reserve eating natural food consisting of woody browse and hard mast instead of unhealthy and indigestible foods often handed out by violators.

The impact of the feeding was cumulative. Many of the deer that were fed and had lost their fear of humans were raising fawns. I believe the fawns learned an opportunistic approach that handouts were much easier to seek than foraging for food. This made the fawns much more susceptible to predation and less likely to survive in the wild.

Another problem associated with feeding wildlife is that the food humans often offer is unhealthy and nutritionally inadequate, causing serious health problems for the animals, especially when they're young and developing. Digestive problems can even be associated with foods that may seem healthy. An example of this would be feeding deer on your property. Deer are ruminants, which means that food is broken down in several stomach chambers by bacteria, protozoa and yeasts. It sometimes takes a deer weeks to adapt to new food types. Deer may gorge themselves on supplemen-

When wildlife concentrate, disease outbreaks, such as Chronic Wasting Disease and blackhead can occur and be very serious.



tal food that they cannot digest, resulting in a deer dying with a full stomach, a condition referred to as an impacted rumen.

Reproduction rates may also be affected when wildlife feeding occurs. In the wild, the number of offspring produced is often directly related to the amount of food available. Survival also depends on the amount of food available. This is nature's way of keeping populations within the carrying capacity of the habitat. When feeding occurs, animals may produce more young, and soon the population will exceed what the habitat can support. If the artificial food source becomes unavailable, animals may starve. Before starvation occurs, serious damage to the surrounding habitat will occur in the form of overbrowsing.

Concentrating animals into feeding areas also increases the risk of disease transmission. Feeding changes the natural dispersion of wildlife and causes them to congregate in an unnaturally small area. When wild animals concentrate, disease outbreaks can occur and be very serious. Examples of diseases associated with feeding include blackhead in turkey and Chronic Wasting Disease in deer.

Blackhead is a disease caused by a protozoan parasite that lives in the intestines of most domestic chickens. Wild turkeys are very susceptible to this disease when concentrated around an infected food source. In this situation, the turkeys ingest intestinal worms that harbor blackhead.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) belongs to a family of diseases called spongiform encephalopathies. Infected animals suffer damage to nerves in the upper spinal cord and brain tissue that eventually results in death. CWD can be spread from animal to animal, and has been confirmed and contained

in West Virginia to a small area in Hampshire County.

Except when animals are in close proximity to humans, feeding deer and turkey are rarely a safety or health risk to humans. That is not true for bears. When bears are fed, they quickly lose their fear of people, often resulting in scary confrontations that usually lead to the bear being killed. Feeding by individuals who are hoping for a “closer look,” coupled with last winter’s mast failure has made bear complaints increase dramatically. The summer of 2007 showed over a 500 percent increase from 2006 in the amount of bear/human conflict complaints that I received in my area of assignment in Pocahontas County. Many of these conflicts were a direct result of people feeding bears.

Bears do not discriminate between houses in rural and urban areas. They think if they are fed at one house, then they will be fed at all houses. This often results in serious property damage, and in extreme situations has contributed to bears entering houses or camps for food. Intentional feeding is not the only risk for people / bear conflicts. It is imperative that people living, camping, or otherwise visiting bear country take great care not to provide bears with the opportunity to cause problems. This can be accomplished in part by taking down bird feeders, removing left over pet foods from feeding containers, and securing garbage in a locked building.

Campers should lock coolers in their vehicles or hang food in a food bag at least 10 feet off the ground

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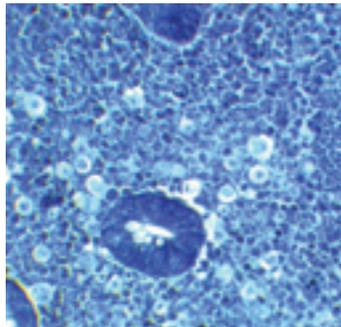


and 10 feet out from trees. Avoid discarding scraps around campsites and never take food in a tent or camper!

Wildlife management focuses on wildlife populations, not individual animals. The overall fitness of a population can't focus on individual animals, which is often the case in feeding situations. In many cases, habitat can be improved and managed to sustain more wildlife. There is no shortcut to provide this habitat improvement. In most cases, feeding is an attempt at a



Wild turkeys can be exposed to the parasite that causes the Blackhead disease if eating from an infected food source. It is better for them to depend on wild food sources.



A microscopic view of the parasite that causes blackhead in turkey.



Bears become used to receiving hand-outs and lose fear of humans.

shortcut to provide more wildlife, but in the long run it usually leads to problems and, ultimately, less wildlife.

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