



Feeding wildlife can be an enjoyable pastime if some consideration is given to unintended consequences.

Top photo: Joy Viola, Northeastern University, bugwood.org; Bottom photo: Becky McPeake, University of Arkansas.

Unintended Consequences of Feeding Wildlife

Becky McPeake

Professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist

Many people enjoy feeding wildlife, and in particular songbirds and white-tailed deer. Animals become more visible for viewers eager to connect with nature which has been shown to improve one's mental outlook. Bait can lure animals in close for a safe harvest as in the case of deer, and nuisance control as with feral hogs. However, these unnatural congregations of wildlife can lead to unintended consequences.

For songbirds, occasionally bacterial or viral disease outbreaks occur around feeders. Some of the most common are salmonellosis, avian pox, and conjunctivitis. Songbirds may appear weak, have discharge around the eyes or partial blindness, convulsions, or wart-like growths in the case of avian pox. Dead or near-dead birds may be found with these symptoms. It's recommended that seed waste be removed, feeders be cleaned and disinfected weekly, and in severe cases, feeding be suspended for a few weeks. Some experts recommend avoiding feeders with small openings which may encourage disease spread when an infected bird's cheek or eye touches the feeder and passes the disease to the next bird feeding from that hole.

With wild game feeders, disease transmission is also of concern, and in particular [Chronic Wasting Disease](#), also called CWD. CWD is a fatal neurological illness occurring in North American cervids including white-tailed deer. It was first detected in Arkansas in 2016 and currently has been detected in 20 counties. CWD is spread directly between animals and indirectly when animals come into contact with objects contaminated with infected saliva, urine, feces, or carcasses. Although there is no definitive evidence indicating CWD and other diseases are transmitted at bait feeders, it is known that crowding contributes to the spread of infectious diseases. Therefore, most wildlife disease experts recommend avoiding feeding deer particularly where CWD is present.

Several studies as well as field observations by hunters have noted how baiting affects the distribution of local wildlife. A recent [study about deer feeders in South Carolina](#) focused on coyotes and their movements relative to deer feeders. They collected over 100,000 camera images at 15 feeder sites and the surrounding area on private land. One of their findings noted that does brought their fawns to the feeders in late evening and at night when coyotes tend to be most active, which could put fawns at a higher risk. They also noted cases where feral hogs deterred deer from feeding at bait stations. In a Mississippi State University study, only 25% of the animals visiting feeders were deer. Bait which attracts multiple species in close proximity, such as deer, feral hogs, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, and songbirds may increase the risk of diseases crossing over to other species.

Although obvious to many, the feed needs to be fresh, clean, and disease-free. Never use moldy or pest-infested feed. Sometimes feed contamination is not entirely obvious. An example is corn tainted with aflatoxin. Aflatoxins are produced naturally in the environment by certain fungi that are found on corn, peanuts, cottonseed, and tree nuts. At high levels, they can cause health issues for humans and animals. Aflatoxins can be harmful before seen with the naked eye, therefore products are tested before being distributed to food and feed manufacturers. Sometimes corn which doesn't pass inspection for human or livestock consumption is repurposed as deer corn. Although high levels are harmful to wild mammals, even low levels are fatal to birds including wild turkeys, bobwhites, and doves. Random tests of bagged and bulk deer corn suggest aflatoxin levels vary widely, but with most corn being safe. Corn that is left on the ground can develop aflatoxin quicker during warm humid weather than in colder winter months. The National Deer Association recommends three ways to reduce the risk of exposing deer and other wildlife to high aflatoxin levels: 1) buy tested feed, 2) distribute smaller amounts so less is left on the ground, and 3) clean your feeder using 1 part bleach to 6 parts water. Refill the feeder only when completely dry (moisture promotes fungal growth).

When feeding wildlife, keep in mind the unintended consequences. Commit to maintaining a clean feeder and providing fresh feed. Limit the amount of feed and how it's presented to prevent fungal growth and reduce the risk of harmful diseases. Consider minimizing the timeframe when feed is available to reduce crowding but still achieve your goals. Arguably some of the most ardent wildlife fans are those who feed them. Following a few steps can help keep wildlife healthy and disease-free for continued enjoyment.