

Alternatives to Feeding Wildlife

Everyone loves to see wildlife up close and feeding is one way of attracting birds and animals close enough to view them easily. Unfortunately, feeding wildlife may be harmful because it encourages unnatural animal behaviour, can lead to an unbalanced diet and can create a dependency on the food being provided.

This Note identifies ways that landholders can attract wildlife to their property with long-lasting benefits for both landholder and wildlife. Rather than providing food directly, habitat can be created for wildlife by planting food supplies and providing shelters that will encourage wildlife to keep returning.



Satin Bowerbirds feed mostly on rainforest fruits as well as insects, flowers and nectar. Food left around picnic areas, where this female was observed, is not part of their natural diet. Photo by Deborah Metters.

How can feeding wildlife be harmful?

While there is not a significant body of scientific research into the effects of feeding wildlife, there is evidence that direct feeding of wildlife may be harmful. The following issues have been raised regarding the direct feeding of wildlife based on observation and experience:

- Artificial feeding sites can provide food unsuitable for wildlife. In particular, foods such as meat and bread are not a natural part of an animal's diet and can cause problems with the gut. Bread is a particular problem, because it is easily digestible and can ferment and cause a build up of acid in the gut of animals (referred to as lactic acidosis).
- Animals that are regularly fed can lose their fear of people, making them more vulnerable to malicious acts.
- Animals may be more vulnerable to attack by domestic animals, either when they are feeding or from becoming over-familiar with domesticated animals.
- Some wildlife can become aggressive and will demand food or cause a nuisance. Aggressive behaviour has been known to result in injuries to humans (eg. magpie swooping) and other animals, as well as property damage such as chewing of timber and other fixtures by cockatoos.
- Diseases can be passed on at feeding stations when an infected bird or animal comes into close contact with healthy animals by sharing the same food or water source. Diseases, such as Lumpy Jaw in animals, or bird borne diseases, including the highly contagious psittacosis and psittacine beak and feather disease, can be spread by contact, feather dander, saliva and droppings.
- Dropped or left over food can attract pest and feral animals like House Sparrows, Common (or Indian) Mynas, rats and mice.



Feeding wildlife gives people a personal wildlife experience but may create long term problems for wildlife.

Does feeding wildlife help them?

Wildlife feeding has limited conservation value as it can disrupt the natural balance of animal populations and available resources. This can occur in a number of ways.

Only a small number of native animals and birds within an ecosystem can take advantage of the foods on offer. Feeding can artificially boost some animal populations and create an imbalance. For example, feeding may attract large numbers of Common Brushtail Possums. This can result in other tree-dwelling mammals or birds having difficulty as they are competing with an abundant and aggressive rival for scarce resources such as nest hollows. Feeding aggressive wildlife, such as kookaburras or magpies, can also disadvantage other native species of milder temperament when competing for food or other resources.

Some people feed wildlife to assist survival rates during droughts. This interferes with the natural balance in the Australian bush, when animal numbers 'boom' in good times and die off or 'bust' in the bad. Keeping wildlife populations artificially high in a time when resources are scarce can cause long term damage to degraded landscapes and place extreme pressure on remaining resources.



Wildlife can become a problem when there is a regular source of food provided such as picnic grounds and coffee shops in bushland areas.

A more natural way to attract wildlife to your property

Feeding native wildlife is a contentious issue and there are a variety of opinions about the impacts. It may be best to take a cautious approach and attract wildlife to your land in a more natural way. It will also provide habitat for many of the animals you cannot see and contribute to your local biodiversity.

Protecting and improving habitat on your land is the best way to enjoy wildlife up close. Creating habitat will provide food, shelter and places to breed for a range of animals. You can protect and improve habitat by:

- Keeping existing natural vegetation on your property.
- Creating diverse native habitats on your property. This includes understorey, midstorey and canopy plants, along with fallen logs and leaf litter. Don't be tempted to 'tidy-up' the bush.
- Finding out about the natural diet of the wildlife you want to attract and provide suitable habitat and food plants.

Different species of wildlife require different types of food and shelter. Plant native grasses and herbs for seed-eating, ground-feeding birds like finches. Fruiting native shrubs and trees will provide food for fruit-eating, tree-feeding birds like parrots and cockatoos. Carnivorous birds such as kookaburras, magpies and butcherbirds require healthy leaf litter and structural vegetation (i.e. trees and shrubs for perching) to catch invertebrates, small reptiles and mice. Insectivorous and/or nectar-feeding birds, such as honeyeaters, fly-catchers and robins need structural vegetation and healthy leaf litter to catch flying insects, ground-dwelling invertebrates like spiders, as well as nectar-providing plants.

- Planting a variety of native trees and shrubs that flower or fruit at different times of the year.



- Remembering to also provide habitat for insects, other invertebrates, skinks and frogs.
- Improving dams to create wildlife-friendly environments, with a shallow, reedy area as well as a deep area to encourage a mix of wading and diving birds. (See *Land for Wildlife Note W3 - Dam Wildlife*).
- Providing nesting sites (including nest boxes) and other wildlife shelters which will be of assistance to some wildlife species.

Natural habitats can be enhanced even in the most heavily populated parts of Queensland, like the greater Brisbane area. Implementing some of the points suggested above can help to provide suitable habitat for a range of wildlife species.



Mistletoe is an important food resource for butterflies, birds and some mammals such as possums.



Nest boxes can be used to supplement a lack of hollow trees by providing roosting and nesting sites for a diversity of wildlife species.



Grey-crowned Babblers are energetic birds that forage from the ground to high limbs of trees.

If you decide to directly feed wildlife, you can still reduce your impact

There are some important things you can do if you want to avoid the more harmful aspects of wildlife feeding. These include:

- Placing the food station in the open, so that wildlife can spot predators.
- Avoid using a feeder and change feeding locations regularly to prevent contamination and reduce the risk of disease.
- Never provide processed foods of any kind.
- Use proper wild bird mixture and avoid black sunflower seeds as they are too rich in oil.
- Limit the amount of food that you put out.
- Put food out at irregular intervals and at different times.
- Make sure water is provided in a safe spot out of reach of predators and that the water is changed regularly.
- Do not handle wildlife.
- Never feed wildlife in a national park or conservation reserve. These areas are specifically set aside to allow natural interactions between species.
- Keep your pets away from feeding areas.

Where to find out more

The Birds Australia website provides advice on how to create a refuge for birds based on research results. See *Guidelines for the Development of Bird Habitat* at www.birdsinbackyards.net/spaces/guidelines.cfm

There are many examples on the internet of how to establish a wildlife friendly garden. The Society for Growing Australian Plants provides excellent information for gardening in a sub-tropical climate at www.sgapqld.org.au/article48.html

What you can do

- ✓ Learn what wildlife frequents your area.
- ✓ Seek to maintain or create an environment that will provide natural food for wildlife.
- ✓ Provide habitat elements for a range of wildlife including fruiting and flowering plants, fallen branches and logs, leaf litter and nesting sites.
- ✓ Include native grasses and sedges in plantings.
- ✓ Remember to provide habitat for smaller creatures such as frogs, lizards and insects.
- ✓ Install nest boxes for birds, possums, gliders and insectivorous bats.
- ✓ Provide safe water points for wildlife.
- ✓ If you choose to feed wildlife, provide 'natural' foods on an irregular basis and ensure that food and water stations are kept clean to reduce the risk of disease.
- ✓ Do not feed wildlife in national parks or reserves.



Native grasses such as Kangaroo Grass are a natural food source for a range of wildlife such as kangaroos and wallabies.



Different habitat attracts a diverse range of species by providing them with opportunities to feed, breed and shelter. Waterways allow frogs and other aquatic animals to breed. This frog spawn (circled) was observed after rain.

Land for Wildlife is a voluntary program that encourages and assists landholders to provide habitat for wildlife on their properties. For more information about Land for Wildlife South East Queensland, or to download *Land for Wildlife Notes* free of charge, visit www.lfwseq.com.au

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