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| Feeding Wildlife |
| Please don’t feed wildlife – their lives depend on it. |

Victorians are lucky to be able to share the environment with a diverse range of native wildlife.

People often feed wildlife because they enjoy the close-up experience with wildlife or in the belief that food handouts help the animals to survive.

However, feeding can cause a range of problems for wildlife and humans.

Native animals, whether they are in our backyards or out in nature, have survived because there is available food, water and shelter. Most wildlife feed from a variety of native plants or on small invertebrates, which can be plentiful even in the most settled residential areas.

If there is wildlife around, you can rest assured there is plenty of food available or the animals would not be there. For over a century, these animals have existed alongside us without food from people. This is still the case.

While feeding wildlife can be enjoyable, it is usually bad for the animals, and will do more harm than good. Feeding can result in wildlife:

* becoming dependent on humans for food
* losing their fear of, and causing problems for, humans
* contracting and transmitting diseases
* suffering from dietary deficiencies
* becoming over-abundant and adversely affecting other species
* creating weed or pest problems.

## Dependency on humans for food

Feeding wildlife can cause wild animals to become dependent on humans for food. When this occurs, wildlife lose their foraging skills and can starve when the food source is removed.

For example, when you go away on holidays or move from the area, dependent wildlife may suffer because they have lost the ability to find food for themselves.

## Losing their fear of, and causing problems for,

**humans**

Wild animals that are used to being fed often lose their fear of people, and this in turn can cause problems for the animals and people.

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) frequently receives complaints of people feeding wild animals. Often, the animals have become a nuisance and the caller wants them killed or removed. Many people do not think about the local impact when they start feeding wildlife. Wild animals do not usually discriminate between one human and another and will often start pestering anyone for food. They may also cause damage to homes, property and infrastructure.

***Figure 1: Sulphur Crested Cockatoo***

***(Photo: Nick Talbot)***

For example, cockatoos need to chew items to maintain their beaks at the correct length and condition. In the wild, they achieve this by chewing bark and branches in their roost trees. When people give them food, they tend to hang around near where they are fed. This can result in cockatoos chewing on fittings, outdoor furniture, or vegetation on neighbouring properties. The best solution is to find out who is feeding the birds and ask them to stop.

Wildlife that have lost their instinctive wariness of people due to feeding may become dangerous or aggressive towards humans. For example, kangaroos may kick or scratch people where they are regularly fed.

Where large wildlife such as kangaroos cause problems, they may have to be humanely destroyed. This can easily be avoided by not feeding the animal.

## Contracting and transmitting disease

Just like humans, wild animals are opportunistic and will often go for the most convenient food source available. Animals may gather in abnormally large numbers where food is readily available. This means that if one animal has an illness or disease, it can easily spread throughout the group, especially if feeding stations are not kept constantly clean. Entire groups of wildlife can be wiped out by diseases.

Sometimes wildlife carries diseases that readily spread to people, pets and livestock. These diseases include Australian Bat Lyssavirus, Hendra virus, salmonellosis, Psittacosis, avian influenza and leptospirosis. Many wildlife species also carry parasites that are easily transferred. For example, scabies mites from wombats can cause mange in pets and humans, and vice versa.

The transmission of diseases from wildlife to humans and pets can be avoided by not feeding wildlife and avoiding close contact with wild animals.

## Dietary deficiencies

Most wildlife need a variety of foods in their diet, and if they fill up on "junk", they will not get the balanced diet they need for good health. A balanced diet is particularly important in young or developing animals. Humans often feed wildlife food that they have in their house or can easily buy - people food - which bears no resemblance to what the animals naturally eat in the wild.

Altering or supplementing wildlife diets with foods they wouldn’t otherwise eat, or by increasing the amount of some foods, may cause nutrient deficiencies, obesity or diseases in some wildlife. The wrong food can also kill some wildlife. For example, wallabies and kangaroos that are given bread can develop a potentially fatal disease of the jaw.

## Becoming over-abundant

In the wild, the number of animals being born and surviving to adulthood is often directly related to the amount of natural food available. When an unnatural food supply becomes available, animals may produce more young and soon there may be more animals living in the area than what the natural food sources can support. If the human feeders go away or artificial feeding stops, the animals may starve.

An overabundance of wild animals drawn to a feeding area can also result in damage to the local habitat. This can have wide-ranging effects, as habitat degradation reduces the survival prospects of all wildlife.

# Creating pest plant or animal problems

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Feeding can encourage pest species, such as rats, mice, foxes, feral cats and introduced birds into an area. Food such as hay and bird seed may contain weed seeds and create a weed infestation.

Feeding stations can attract predators, especially cats and dogs, which may prey on wildlife and give large, aggressive and behaviourally dominant animals an unnatural advantage. Non-dominant animals are often forced to move away from feeding stations. Aggressive behaviour can lead to injuries and even death, particularly for vulnerable animals.

# What can I do to help wildlife?

Wild animals need habitat, not food handouts. If you want to encourage native animals to come into your yard by feeding them, try planting local indigenous native trees and shrubs. Plants such as grevilleas, bottlebrushes or banksias look good and provide safe, healthy foods for a range of native species.

You could also provide nesting boxes or hollow logs for birds and mammals or install a bird bath.

Visits to parks or camping trips are other great ways to interact with wildlife. Just remember to enjoy them from a distance and let them remain wild.

For more information please contact the DELWP Customer Contact Centre on 136 186 or visit [www.wildlife.vic.gov.au](http://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au).