



Feeding wildlife

doing more harm than good

Many Western Australians have fond memories of packing up a picnic and gleefully tearing up bits of crusty old bread, excited to provide the ducks and swans with the sustenance they thought they needed. While this scene likely paints a familiar picture for many of us and is a well-intentioned and beloved pastime, feeding wildlife does not do any good.

by Kaylee Martin



Western Australia is home to diverse and unique wildlife. Many residents and tourists enjoy the privilege of observing these animals up close in their own habitats.

Take the western grey kangaroo (*Macropus fuliginosus*) hopping along the beach at Lucky Bay in Esperance, the Australian pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) snoozing on light poles along the Canning Highway bridge, or the quokkas (*Setonix brachyurus*) wandering about our feet on Rottnest Island.

These examples of animals living in proximity to humans are quintessentially Western Australian. The interactions have become part of our history and form some of our favourite memories.

It's not uncommon for communities to develop a sense of ownership around the local wildlife, where feeding and interacting with the animals is a legacy that has existed for years.

But DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service is firm on the rules around feeding wildlife. Put simply, members of the public should always refrain from doing so.

THE NUTRITION

Human food just does not cut it for wildlife. It is often highly processed and lacks the species-specific nutritional requirements needed to help that animal thrive. Even unprocessed fruits and vegetables are not good for wildlife since it is not their natural diet.

Food commonly fed to wildlife — such as mince, bread, shredded cheese or pet food — can lead to health complications, devastating nutritional imbalances and even cause life-threatening issues.

'Natural' protein sources like raw meats and sausages might seem like a viable choice, but these are full of saturated fats and do not have enough calcium to meet nutritional requirements.

Particularly for magpies, a diet that relies on mince will lead to weakened bones, rotting beaks and poor overall body function.

Founder of Bluegum Rescue and Rehabilitation and authorised wildlife rehabilitator Sue Turner said her facility



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had seen some birds so badly impacted by this diet they were unable to hold their own heads up.

“Well-meaning people might provide human-grade mince to the families of magpies that come into their gardens begging for food, but mince on its own is not a substantial diet for magpies,” Sue said.

“Adult magpies who are fed this diet may go on to have calcium deficiencies in the eggs, meaning the babies are born with deficiencies.

“Some babies suffer such major calcium deficiencies they can't hold their heads up, cannot stand up, and their legs and necks are malformed.

“It's very sad and unfortunately we see many cases like this each year. In less severe cases, birds can be fed additional calcium supplements to aid rehabilitation, but in very severe cases the birds have to be euthanised.”

Bread is another commonly fed human food for birds, particularly water-dwelling species.

While a popular pastime, feeding bread to ducks provides the animals with surplus energy and can even stick to their beak, causing it to rot from the inside out.

Similarly, feeding bread to swans causes an intense nutritional deficiency in essential vitamins and minerals. This leads to a condition called 'angel wing' where the wings twist unnaturally outward, and the birds are rendered flightless.

Beyond the vitamin and mineral deficiencies, many species have considerably smaller energy requirements

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Main Western grey kangaroos in Lucky Bay can become very ill from eating human food.

Photo – Tourism WA

Inset Carnaby's black cockatoos at a small backyard bird bath.

Photo – Ann Storr

Above Feeding friendly quokkas on Rottnest Island can lead to aggressive behaviour or result in death.

Photo – Tourism WA



Learn more about the impacts of feeding wildlife

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.



than human food provides, leading to fatty build-ups around vital organs and premature death for individuals.

Depending on the species, providing any kind of wildlife even a small portion of human food can be equivalent to loading a person up with a few cheeseburgers and numerous slices of pizza in one sitting.

THE NUMBERS

Most native animal species are opportunistic and will congregate wherever they can find easy food in abundance.

Parks and Wildlife Service wildlife officer Riley Carter said people who

provide an artificial food source may be unintentionally upsetting the balance of delicate ecological systems.

“Well-intentioned community members often supply seed in their backyards for birds as they think it’s a more natural diet, but this is not varied enough to provide the full nutritional balance needed,” Riley said.

“Our wildlife has also come to learn how to best source food from the community, whether at local schools, shopping centres, wheelie bins or unguarded pet food.

“By taking the time to simply ensure bins are secured, litter is off the ground

and pet food is not left out, wildlife will learn to source their food by natural means.

“Unfortunately, if this is not done, fauna can become reliant on artificial food sources from rubbish, which pushes the ecological balances out, brings a higher volume of animals to the area and increases aggression and disease risks.”

An unbalanced ecological system can have a serious flow-on effect.

An increase in population to an area can put excessive pressure on the natural food sources, causing some plant species — including threatened species — to become

Above left Times have changed since the 1980s when tourists would regularly feed kangaroos.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above centre Feeding ducks and ducklings is common but can lead to malnutrition, disease and aggressive behaviour.

Photo – Matt Swan/DBCA

Above right Regular sources of human food result in over-population of seagulls causing a nuisance.

Photo – Rick Dawson

Right It’s best to limit interactions with quokkas for the safety and welfare of the animal.

Photo – Tourism WA

Feeding quokkas

Quokkas are primarily grazing herbivores, meaning their diet consists mainly of buds, leaves, seeds and roots, grasses and succulents.

Feeding quokkas human foods like bread, crackers and other processed items can cause disease and deformities.

Their gastrointestinal systems are built to digest plants, and other kinds of food are detrimental to quokka health.

Not only does it cause health issues, but it disturbs their natural foraging behaviours and can lead to an unhealthy reliance on humans as a food source.





Above Licensed wildlife rehabilitators feed joey kangaroos a specific formula.
Photo – Lauren Cabrera/DBCA

Above right Discarded bread in lakes and rivers cause the build-up of harmful bacteria that causes botulism in birds like magpies.
Photo – Native Arc

Below right Australian white ibis are considered a pest and often found looking for food in bins.
Photo – Matt Swan/DBCA

completely depleted. With a lack of natural food available, wildlife will become reliant on artificial sources provided by humans, or they will simply take from crops and gardens in order to survive.

This can quickly sour the rewarding experience of having wildlife up close, turning the animals from a privilege to a pest.

Birds and kangaroos attracted to an area for artificial food sources cause significant damage to crops on farmland, and possums can invade suburban roof spaces.

This unnatural concentration of these animals can also see a rise in the outbreaks of transmissible diseases, which can be fatal to the species or have a negative impact on humans.

Some diseases such as tuberculosis, salmonella, toxoplasmosis, psittacosis and *E. coli* infections are also zoonotic,

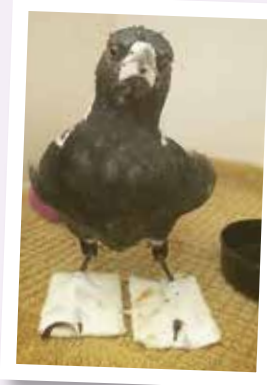
Botulism

Botulism is a bacterial disease that typically causes infected animals to suffer paralysis.

An infected bird may start to exhibit unusual behaviour such as being unable to fly, or hold its head up, dragging its wings or have an unusual gait or stance.

While it's commonly associated with waterbirds, botulism can occur in carnivorous birds like magpies if they ingest the toxin. This may occur when they ingest maggots that have been feeding on infected carcasses.

In the early stages, botulism can be effectively treated and birds have a chance of survival if they receive supportive care from a professional. Members of the public who notice birds with these symptoms should immediately call the Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055 for advice and to be put in contact with a wildlife rehabilitator or vet.



meaning they can be transmissible to humans through direct contact or exposure through faecal waste and urine.

SAVING THE SICK

With wildlife living in close proximity to metropolitan areas, there is always a chance a member of the community will come across an animal that is sick or suffering an injury.

At Bluegum Rescue and Rehabilitation, it's common for animals to be brought in for this reason.

And under current legislation, all wildlife must be released if healthy or handed in to a licensed rehabilitator or vet within 72 hours to ensure no further health damage is caused.

"One of the key issues we see is people trying to look after an animal they have found, but this needs to be handled by a professional as there could be a number of health issues that are not visible," Sue said.

"Sometimes kangaroos die on the roads with a live joey in their pouch and people try to save these, care for them and feed them cow's milk or formula.

"This can cause issues with the gut as their gastrointestinal systems will not cope with the sugar content, and it can even lead to the development of cataracts and cause the joey to become blind."

For long-necked turtles and birds living in suburban parks, botulism can cause grief in the warmer weather.

"In the summer months, we see a fair few cases of botulism, particularly in birds and long-necked turtles," Sue said.

"Many people may be unaware that attempting to feed bread can cause this illness. Discarded bread in lakes and rivers can support the build-up of harmful bacteria causing the disease."

MAINTAIN DISTANCE

For the welfare of our wildlife, it is always recommended the public remain respectful and enjoy wildlife from afar.

Next time you spot a native animal in its habitat, simply observe, enjoy and allow nature to take its course.



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