

KILLING DEER WITH KINDNESS

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

Animals eagerly gather at the appointed time each day, stomping their feet and prancing nervously in anticipation of the bonanza they know will shortly arrive. A click, then a whir, and their patience is rewarded with a shower of pure, tasty, easy-to-eat treats. After the first larger animals have their fill, their places are soon taken by other area residents including birds, raccoon, rats, skunks, opossum, and insects. Even the predators — hawks, snakes, and coyotes — know that this is a place of abundance.

As suburban development continues to sprawl and drought continues to scorch the landscape, **humans are seeing the plight of hungry deer and want to help**. Some choose to offer supplemental food to the animals in the hopes that it will help offset the poor conditions. Others worry about the impact of deer on vegetable and ornamental gardens or the danger they pose to drivers on the roadways and even people and pets on their walks.

The result is often a battle, pitting neighbor against neighbor as everyone wants the best for wildlife *and* for humans, and both try to find the solution to a problem that isn't going away.

Kelly Simon, Urban Wildlife Biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department summed it up: "We love wildlife and we want to help support a healthy ecosystem, but we don't always know the best ways to help."

PROVIDING SUPPLEMENTAL FOOD

Unfortunately, deer feeding areas can be a fertile breeding ground for pathogens and parasites. Deadly aflatoxin and mycotoxin, frequently found in bags of deer corn, can kill many deer and birds before it is even recognized, and Chronic Wasting Disease has been spread at feeding sites in other states. Feeding stations attract more than just deer: opossum, raccoon, rodents, and skunks are frequent visitors to any regular feeding station. These critters bring in and spread their own parasites and diseases, including rabies.

Humans are seeing the plight of hungry deer and want to help, but our "help" may be doing more harm than good.



Large white-tailed deer at feeder



Photo by Erin Wehland © Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept 2016

Deer feeding stations can become vectors for disease and parasites

Could it be that feeding deer is even more cruel than not feeding them?

And that's not even considering the fact that white-tailed deer, a ruminant species, have a complex digestive system. If fed the wrong food at the wrong time of year, they can actually starve to death – even with a full stomach.

The last complication of deer feeding may seem like a benefit: well-fed deer turn those calories into fawns. Even with all the problems mentioned above, deer that are fed will increase in number. Unfortunately, that compounds the original problem: the land wasn't able to support the amount of deer it had to begin with – that's why we sometimes see the skinny, hungry deer. In a population that is being fed there are even more mouths to feed, and less and less natural food is available. So, the deer continue to starve. **Could it be that feeding deer is even more cruel than not feeding them?**

"If we let the natural habitat set the population level of the herd," says Simon, "the deer population, overall, will be healthier." In good years, numbers will increase, and in tough years, we'll lose a few individuals. But the population itself will be stable. That isn't to say we can't help. Simon offers the following to folks who want to create the most favorable habitat possible to area wildlife:



Photo by Judit Green, © Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept 2016

Hand-feeding wildlife - Are they still "wild?"



WAYS TO HELP DEER

“Ecosystem.” Instead of focusing on one animal or one species, think about what actions might make a better overall habitat.

“Diversity.” Different species need different things. To prevent one species or another from dominating and degrading the habitat for others (such as grackles destroying trees in grocery store parking lots), ensure your habitat has a mosaic of good habitat items. Tall trees, shrubs, grasses, flowering plants – these are great layers for wildlife. Plants that provide a variety of fruit, nuts, seeds, berries, and grains at different times of the year also support diversity.

“Habitat.” Wildlife don’t just need food. They also need water, shelter, and places to rear their young. Examine area habitat and enhance those features that would be good for wildlife. Look at riparian systems (like streams, greenbelts, drainage areas, and rivers) – are they free of pollution? Are they invaded by exotic species? Are their banks stable?

“Native.” Our ecosystem functions best when it is composed of elements that are native to the area. Exotic grasses (like Bermudagrass), exotic trees (like chinaberry), and exotic predators (like domestic dogs and cats) all push out native plants and wildlife and put pressure on the ecosystem that can cause its collapse.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When we feed deer, especially in suburban areas, we cause more harm than good. We can appreciate wild Texas deer by not feeding them, by improving their habitat, and by allowing the population to stabilize in a way that is healthy for the ecosystem.



Strong white tailed deer buck in healthy habitat

Contact Us

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Urban Wildlife Biologists can provide technical guidance to communities who wish to provide habitats that support healthy wildlife populations.

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