

Feeding wildlife can have tragic results for them

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We see the warning every year, on signs in parks, at campgrounds and in the news: Don't feed the wildlife!

But why not? After all, with cities growing and green spaces shrinking, it's pretty obvious that wild animals are having an increasingly tough time finding food and shelter. All because of us.

So why shouldn't we help out by providing food when we can?

I put the question to the experts at the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C.

With a 30-year history of caring for injured, orphaned and pollution-damaged wildlife, they know, first-hand, the results of human-animal conflict in the urban environment. Here's what they had to say:

When we offer food to wildlife in our gardens and backyards, whether we mean to or not, we are actually inviting those wild animals to our homes.

If the animal is a large predator in search of food - or of smaller animals attracted by the food, such as neighbourhood pets - we've just set the scene for a serious wildlife management problem.

You've probably seen it on the news: Adult feeds hungry coyote; coyote bites child; coyote is hunted and killed.

People leave garbage out in areas accessible by bears; bear extends foraging trips to daytime hours in family backyards; bear gets shot, cubs get orphaned.

The scenario can play out in many ways, but the outcome is often tragic for human families and almost always so for the animals.

Under the B.C. Wildlife Act, it is illegal to feed wildlife categorized as dangerous - such as coyotes, cougars or bears - because they form an unnatural dependency, becoming habituated to human food and losing their natural foraging abilities.

They also lose their innate (and necessary) fear of humans as they learn to associate people with a food source. As soon as they feel safe coming close to humans and their habitats, both they and the public are in danger.

In addition to the B.C. Wildlife Act, some municipalities have introduced bylaws that limit the feeding of all wildlife.

How sad it would be if we lost the opportunity to provide food for the birds that frequent our gardens. What we need to remember is that feeding any animal is not a right but a responsibility.

For example, the type of food we provide must match the animals' natural diet.

If it doesn't, it can cause disease or in some cases even death.

Bread, for instance, has no nutritional value for animals.

It cannot be easily digested by birds, and so it prevents them from absorbing nutrients

from natural sources that are essential for winter survival.

In addition, if you start to provide food for birds in the fall, you must continue to do so all through the winter, until spring thaw.

Birds will quickly learn to depend on your garden as a food source through the barren winter months.

Your bird feeders may seem like a hobby to you, but to the animals who've come to count on them, they're life or death.

A side of the story that often gets forgotten when we talk about urban sprawl is how the phenomenon affects us.

We know it's hard on our wild neighbours, but what about our wild selves?

As our urban environment grows, we can become increasingly isolated from wild places, which makes seeing and interacting with urban wildlife a crucial element of staying connected to nature and to our own animal natures.

There are lots of easy and safe ways for us to do this, such as spending time in the woods or by water, or closer to home by introducing birdbaths, feeders and nest boxes to our backyards and creating garden habitats that are rich in native plant species.

For more information on how you can fulfil your own "natural" urges while helping wild animals in your neighbourhood, visit the Wildlife Rescue Association's education pages at www.wildliferescue.ca/prevent.shtml. And save your leftovers for tomorrow's lunch.

Diane Haynes is the author of Jane Ray's Wildlife Rescue Series for teens. The information in this column was provided by Krystal Brennan, Jane Thomsing and Glenn Boyle of the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C.

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