

Don't Feed the Wildlife! by Rebecca Lexa

As the weather cools, local wildlife prepare for the winter ahead. This includes foraging for as much food as they can. Some, like Douglas squirrels, hoard food away in larders that they can visit later; others, such as black bears, put on as much fat as possible before hibernating for several months. But there are many animals, from dark-eyed juncos to elk, which need to find food year-round.

It is normal to feel empathy for their struggle. It may be tempting to leave food out for wildlife to help them through the winter. Unfortunately our good intentions may actually do serious harm to these animals. Sometimes the food we offer isn't good for them; bread, for example, can cause ducks and geese to develop diseases associated with malnutrition. Wild mammals like deer and raccoons can quickly lose their fear of humans once they figure out that we offer them food, which can make them more likely to be hit by cars or otherwise be in conflict with us. Adding too much food to your ecosystem can cause wildlife to overpopulate, which leads to more starvation and disease.

The best thing you can do for wildlife is to encourage the protection of their natural habitat and food sources. If possible, add native plants to your yard that are their natural food, like wavy thistle, evergreen huckleberry, and deer fern. It is okay to feed songbirds from feeders, but be aware these can attract other wildlife, especially if you have a suet feeder.