

Keep Our Wildfowl Wild

Verulamium Park

Feeding the ducks is a pastime that has been enjoyed by many for generations. However, whilst it makes us feel good, it is actually making the ducks and geese poorly!

Is it good to feed waterfowl?

No, artificial feeding is actually harmful to waterfowl and bad for the lake?

Artificial feeding of waterfowl can cause:

- Poor nutrition
- Increased hybridization
- Water pollution
- Delayed migration
- Overcrowding
- Spread of disease
- Costly management efforts
- Unnatural behaviour
- Cumulative effects
- Devaluation of the species

Read on to explore this issue and decide for yourself whether you want to continue feeding waterfowl.

Nutrition

It would seem that providing food for ducks and geese would make them healthier. However, this is not the case. Waterfowl at artificial feeding sites are often found to suffer from poor nutrition. In natural settings, waterfowl seek and feed on a variety of nutritious foods such as aquatic plants, natural grains, and invertebrates. Many of the items commonly used to feed waterfowl (bread and corn etc.) are low in protein and are very poor substitutes for natural foods.

Natural foods are also widely scattered. Ducks and geese are able to find these foods and eat them in relative seclusion. At artificial feeding sites, competition for each scrap of food is high. Some ducks and geese (usually the youngest) are unable to compete and loose out

Visible symptoms of poor nutrition and advanced stages of starvation are often seen at artificial feeding sites. For example, waterfowl may have drooping wings or may lose their ability to fly.

Disease

When ducks and geese feed on scattered corn or bread, they eat in the same place where they defecate. Not healthy. In addition, large concentrations of waterfowl would facilitate the spread of disease. Diseases generally not transmissible in a wild setting find overcrowded and unsanitary conditions very favourable.

Most waterfowl die-offs in the past 10 years have involved artificial feeding:

- Another fatal disease, Aspergillus, occurs when food is scattered too liberally. It piles up and becomes mouldy.
- A large number of ducks died in an outbreak of Avian Botulism this year.

Overcrowding

Feeding attracts birds in unnatural numbers, beyond natural food and water supplies, and frequently in numbers beyond what people will tolerate. Badly-eroded grass around the lake edge is in part a result of overcrowding and becomes unsanitary and unusable.

Delayed Migration

Feeding alters normal migration patterns of waterfowl by shortening or even eliminating them. Ducks, reluctant to leave in the winter, may not survive sudden cold. If the artificial feeding is stopped in time, ducks and geese can quickly adapt to finding natural foods and will follow their companions south.

Unnatural Sites

Artificial feeding often attracts birds to human habitats, restaurants, car parks and roads and can sometimes result in accidental deaths.

Unnatural Behaviour

Waterfowl can rapidly become conditioned to, and dependent on of human feeding. Fed ducks and geese behave differently. They become more aggressive and eventually lose their wariness of humans. Some will not survive because they can't compete. Many will lose the quality which endears them to most people who enjoy Verulamium Park and its wildlife.

Increased Hybridisation

At many feeding sites, domestic ducks have interbred with mallards, further compromising the wild population.

Water Pollution

Excess nutrients in lakes caused by unnatural numbers of waterfowl droppings can result in water-quality problems such as summer algal blooms and the Avian Botulism we experienced in 2015. In addition, where waterfowl congregate to feed, E-coli counts can swell to levels that make the water unsafe.

Cumulative Effects

It may be hard to imagine that a handful of bread could contribute to such a growing problem. In most cases where artificial feeding occurs, one well-intentioned feeder leaves and another soon arrives.

If you have any questions please contact the Parks and Green Spaces team at greenspaces@stalbans.gov.uk or call 01727 819366

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

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