

Cholera, Duck Plague, Avian Influenza, and Avian Botulism. Although these diseases have always existed in waterfowl populations, the risks increase when bird populations become concentrated at feeding sites.

## Environmental Degradation

Waterfowl naturally congregate in wetlands, where natural foods are plentiful. However, when hand feeding occurs, the over-concentration of birds may ultimately cause overgrazing and degradation of the landscape.

High concentrations of birds causes:

- Overgrazing of vegetation leading to soil erosion
- Degradation of the landscape making it undesirable for other species and unsightly for humans
- Unsanitary conditions due to large quantities of bird feces



## Water Pollution

People often feed ducks, geese, or swans at the local pond, or gulls at the beach. This not only causes a nuisance situation with birds begging for and stealing food but also contributes significantly to water pollution in the form of *fecal coliform bacteria*. High levels of fecal coliform bacteria in the water lead to beach closures and the prohibition of shell-

fishing in certain areas. This pollution directly affects the enjoyment of our local waters and impairs the livelihood of local shellfishermen.

Feeding birds can:

- Cause birds to be a nuisance by begging and stealing food and garbage
- Cause beach closures
- Lead to the closure of shellfishing areas in the bay and coastal ponds

## Feeding Waterfowl is BANNED in Rhode Island

As a result of the harm that hand feeding wild waterfowl causes to both the animals and the environment, feeding of wild waterfowl was banned statewide in 2003. Feeding wild waterfowl, wild turkey, wild cervids, black bear, or coyote is not permitted any time in the state of Rhode Island (RI General Laws; Title 20). The violation of any law, rule, or regulation relating to wild animals or wild birds shall be a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of not more than five hundred dollars (\$500), or imprisonment for up to ninety (90) days, or both (RI General Laws; Section 20-1-16).

### Waterfowl questions? Contact:

**Division of Fish & Wildlife: (401) 789-0281**

### Water quality concerns? Contact:

**Office of Water Resources: (401) 222-4700**



## Feeding Waterfowl is Harmful



Rhode Island Department  
of Environmental Management  
Division of Fish & Wildlife



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People have always enjoyed feeding gulls, geese, ducks, or swans at beaches and parks. What they may not realize, is that feeding these animals is harmful to the birds and the environment in many ways. As a result of the harm it causes, a law was passed in Rhode Island that prohibits feeding wild waterfowl (RI General Laws; Title 20).



Waterfowl have an incredible ability to survive and avoid harsh weather conditions. They migrate hundreds of miles south to warmer climates during winter, and some simply endure the harsh winter weather in northern areas. Many species of migratory and resident waterfowl spend the winter in Rhode Island. For all waterfowl, an abundance of naturally occurring food and the quality of their diet are the main driving forces behind the birds' ability to survive.

### Food Quality is Critical

Waterfowl require proper nutrition to survive New England winters. The diet of a young bird during its first year of life must be high in essential fats, proteins, and nutrients to ensure proper development. Adults need a nutrient-rich diet to replace feathers and recondition their bodies after migration and during breeding cycles.

- High nutrition foods include insects, grasses, submerged aquatic plants, and seeds from emergent wetland plants.



- Low nutrition foods include, but are not limited to: bread, crackers, popcorn, pastries, and other processed items.



People unknowingly harm waterfowl by hand feeding food that is low in nutritional value. Problems associated with feeding waterfowl include **malnutrition, dependency, disease, water pollution, and degradation of the environment.**

### Malnutrition

Through evolution, wildlife species have developed skills to obtain food that contains the essential nutrients needed to survive, reproduce, and live a healthy life. Malnutrition is caused by the types of food that people hand to waterfowl, such as bread and crackers. These foods don't provide the necessary energy and nutrients for proper health, and energy is wasted digesting these foods. Birds become dependent upon humans because more poor quality foods are needed to make up the difference.

Malnutrition leads to:

- Low energy and muscle deterioration
- Development of deformed wings in young birds
- Loss of flight later in life
- Lowered ability to avoid predation
- Decrease in successful reproduction
- Lowered life expectancy

### Dependency

Waterfowl, particularly Canada geese, mallards, and feral

mute swans will congregate in areas with abundant food and space. Unfortunately, hand feeding can cause birds to become concentrated in small urban areas that are incapable of supporting large numbers of birds. The birds are then dependent upon humans for food and become nuisance animals. Some species, particularly mute swans, can become aggressive and may need to be removed.

Dependence upon humans for food can cause:

- Loss of their natural fear of humans, creating aggressive behavior
- Concentration of birds near highways and airports, potentially causing motor vehicle and airplane accidents
- Overpopulation of small wetlands and ponds
- Delay or halting of migration to natural wintering sites



### Disease

Lowered nutrition and overpopulation allow disease to spread more quickly, potentially infecting thousands of birds with fatal diseases, such as Avian