

# WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

600 Capitol Way North, Olympia, WA 98501-1091

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## CROSSING PATHS NEWS NOTES

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### Winter wildlife feeding makes us feel good

When the weather outside is frightful, many of us find feeding birds and other wildlife quite delightful.

But does it help wildlife?

Studies show that only small pockets of bird populations occasionally benefit from supplemental feeding under extreme and persistent weather conditions.

Most birds do not depend solely on feeders in their foraging, many obtaining only up to one-fifth of their nutrition at feeders. Feeding can't replace natural habitat needed for winter cover and spring nesting and rearing. And poorly maintained feeding stations can actually harm birds by spreading disease.

Research also shows that the most readily-available feed - grains like whole corn and oats or seeds like sunflower and millet - are not easily digested by wild ungulates like deer or elk. It can take several weeks for deer to adjust to the change from natural browse plants to an artificial diet, and if they don't have enough fat reserves to carry them through the adjustment period, they can die of starvation even with a belly full of undigestible feed.

The best way to help any wild birds or mammals survive a severe winter is to maintain high-quality habitat plantings year-round. Wildlife that goes into the winter in good condition is most able to survive deep snow, ice and cold temperatures. Even in well-functioning natural ecosystems, however, some animals succumb during winter months. The winter season has always kept wildlife populations in balance with available habitat.

Another way to help wild animals in winter is to avoid disturbing them. Animals must conserve their energy to survive winter conditions, and human disturbance causes them to move about. Keep cats and dogs confined, and slow down when traveling in motor vehicles through deer and elk habitat.

The main benefit of wildlife feeding is that it provides a direct, intimate view of wild animals for more than 50 million Americans who provide backyard feeding stations of some kind.

Experts in Cornell University Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch, which collects winter bird feeder use data from volunteers across the country, say most bird feeding does neither significant good nor significant damage. It's something we do for ourselves, they say, and because it has a lot of educational value, the program continues in its 24th season with more than 15,000 participants.

Up close and personal encounters with wildlife can and do trigger lifelong interest in and compassion for wildlife, desire to learn more, and ultimately the "bigger picture" understanding of the need to maintain and enhance year-round wildlife habitat.

Certainly some of the charter members of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary program began with feeding alone and quickly expanded their efforts to landscaping for wildlife.

If you choose to feed birds, please keep the following in mind:

- Use tube feeders for birds to reduce accumulations of droppings that can spread disease; if you use platform feeders, provide only a day's worth of seed at a time.
- Clean and disinfect feeders at least once a month with a solution of one part bleach to nine parts warm water; rinse and dry disinfected feeders thoroughly before re-filling.
- Pick up spilled food or waste from the ground at least once a week.
- Discard feed that is wet, looks or smells moldy, has fungus on it or has been contaminated by rodents.

- Locate feeders where there is no immediate cover for cats to wait in ambush, but close enough to cover to allow birds to escape natural predators like hawks.

If you think you want to feed deer or other wild ungulates, think first about the following:

- Feeding should start early in the winter season to allow animals' digestive systems to adapt, and continue through March or April when natural browse is again abundant.
- The best artificial deer feed is a pelleted ration of about 50 percent alfalfa and 50 percent barley and corn; elk are able to transition fairly quickly to alfalfa hay.
- Once a diet shift has occurred, one white-tailed deer can consume three to four pounds of pelleted feed daily; in just four months, one deer could consume almost 500 pounds of feed.
- Concentrating deer and elk at a feeder can create problems by making the animals more vulnerable to disease, predation and poaching.
- If feeding areas draw animals across well-traveled roads, they are more likely to present a safety hazard and be hit by motor vehicles.
- Deer and elk drawn to artificial feed also can damage nearby agricultural areas, trees, or landscaping, especially if the artificial feed supply is not maintained through the winter.

WDFW feeds some deer and elk on public lands only where needed to prevent agricultural damage to adjacent property (ie. Oak Creek) or where natural winter range has been destroyed by wildfires or other natural disasters (ie. Mount St. Helens).