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Is feeding wild birds OK?

Darryl Jones

It's something most Australian birdwatchers notice on a trip to the Northern Hemisphere: everywhere you go, people are feeding birds.



Credit: istockphoto

From basic hanging trays to elaborate multiple tubes displaying carefully selected seeds of bewildering variety, and from traditional suet balls to expensive electronic dispensers, finches, tits, nuthatches, chickadees and other birds flock to take advantage of the bonanza of free food. The seed and the many associated pieces of hardware are widely available from any supermarket, as well as the shopfronts of all the birding and conservation organisations.

As thoroughly mainstream groups such as the United States' Audubon Society and the British Trust for Ornithology ardently pronounce: 'If you care about bird conservation, feed the birds'.

About half of all Northern Hemisphere households provide food for wild birds, and several threatened species in the United Kingdom – including the song thrush – are now largely sustained through the supplementary foods provided in people's backyards.

For many in Australia, the scale and level of support for this universally popular pastime is astonishing – even possibly alarming. Here, feeding birds is unofficially frowned upon, and typically strongly opposed by most bird and conservation groups.

So, it may be somewhat disconcerting to learn that the bird feeding participation rates in Australia – despite the fairly obvious disapproval – are effectively identical to those in other parts of the world, with studies demonstrating that 38 to 65 per cent of Australian households are actively engaged in feeding. Clearly, we like to feed wild birds.

Should we be concerned? If you listen to some bird experts, we should be very worried! In their strong opinion, feeding increases populations of already common species, leads to the spread of disease and the loss of natural foraging behaviour, and causes birds to become entirely dependent upon people for their food.

On the other hand, other experts state – just as forcefully – that feeding helps birds survive tough winters, allows some species to survive in urban environments, and above all, encourages people to value nature by reconnecting with wildlife. Who is right?

I have been struggling with these issues and questions for many years. Having searched the international literature and talked to experts in many countries, I can confidently say: we still don't know (see [An appetite for connection: why we need to understand the effect and value of feeding wild birds](#)).

While there is no doubt that most bird feeding benefits common species, there is little evidence that this has much effect on other species. Similarly, while there are some very real and catastrophic examples of diseases being spread from feeders where many birds congregate, these examples are extraordinarily rare considering the large number of feeding stations.

The evidence shows that at least one concern – that of birds becoming reliant upon foods offered or discarded by humans – seems to be unwarranted, thankfully.

The problem is that although feeding is extremely popular and widespread, we know remarkably little about its actual effect. Nonetheless, people will continue to feed millions of birds.

We need locally appropriate guidelines that minimise the risks, but until these are fully developed, here are some sensible suggestions:

Provide food suited to the species (no bird should eat bread)

Keep the helping small (it's a snack, not dinner)

Hygiene is vital (you wouldn't eat off a dirty plate)

It's not about what works best for you (it's about the birds!)

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