

What you can do to keep water birds wild

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Florida has 1,197 statute miles of coastline and more than 11,000 miles of freshwater bodies, which brings with it many different bird species that live in an aquatic environment. Depending on which part of the state you're in, you may see herons, egrets, pelicans, and ducks during a stroll around your neighborhood. While watching these birds as they peacefully fly, swim, or search for food, it is important to resist the temptation to feed them because it does more harm than good.

Behavioral problems in the birds can happen as they associate people with food. A big problem is the birds lose their fear of humans and become aggressive. There have been instances of sandhill cranes that seemed tame attacking pets and damaging property during breeding season. Other aggressive examples are gulls, terns, and pelicans swooping, diving or chasing people to obtain food, and geese and ducks can damage lawns by tearing grass up and eating it. In addition, parent birds that become dependent on people for food lose their ability to teach their own young how to properly forage for food. The young may starve as a result.

There is a misperception that giving food to birds is making their life easier; this isn't the case. Bread and processed items may lead to malnutrition because they have little or no nutritional value because a bird's natural diet has a balance of fiber, fats, micronutrients, carbohydrates, and protein is extremely different from what is found in human food. In addition, leftover people food may draw predators into the bird's territory, which threatens the survival of their offspring.

Coastal birds that are seen around fishing piers can choke or suffer internal injuries from attempting to swallow too large a fish. According to University of Florida researchers, large fish bones can puncture a bird's pouch, get caught in the throat, or puncture a bird's stomach. Fishermen may be associated with food and birds may try to eat fish off the hook, which leads to injuries or death from swallowing hooks or getting entangled in fishing line.

Birds become stressed when people feed them up close. During breeding season, approaching nests to feed the birds may lead the birds to change their nest location, abandon their nest, or the nest fails all together. When this happens, birds have to use additional energy to ensure successfully rearing of young or expend a lot of energy without having any young to show for it. Coming close to the nest may result in predators easily finding it as well.

So, what can you do to keep wild birds wild? There are a variety of things. Simply don't feed the birds. You should watch birds only from a distance, which is extremely important during breeding season. To get a closer look, you can use binoculars. If you enjoy fishing, stay with your fishing poles, dispose of fishing line in a trashcan or a monofilament recycling box if available, and throw carcasses of larger fish in covered trashcans. Finally, educating others about the dangers of feeding water birds can make a big impact. A little self control and awareness will help protect our wonderful water birds for years to come.

For the past year, I have been writing about a number of topics based on University of Florida research such as pesticide applicator licensing, irrigation, fertilization, and natural resources. Thank you for taking time to read the articles. Now, I would like to hear from you. A short survey is located at the following web site: <http://indian.ifas.ufl.edu> (look for the Hometown News survey link). Please take a few minutes to complete it and let me know what you think.

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