

FEEDING WILDLIFE HELPS NO ONE.

For many of us it's human nature to want to help animals. Feeding wildlife can seem like the right thing to do, especially if an animal is young, alone, or possibly injured. The truth is that feeding wildlife here at LaRC is inappropriate and nearly always leads to problems for both wildlife and humans. NASA LaRC believes in environmental stewardship. The Center has worked to protect the environment, study and ensure wildlife habitats are conserved, and minimize impacts to Center wildlife. Feeding wildlife endangers the Center's stewardship efforts, and this article is intended to help educate Center personnel on the reasons why not to feed wildlife.

Feeding animals takes the “wild” out of wildlife. When animals become accustomed to easy human food sources (handouts, garbage dumpsters, etc.) they become less adept at surviving in their own habitat. Hunting and foraging skills can be lost from small population segments rather quickly. Why would a fox want to catch a rabbit for dinner when popcorn on the ground doesn't run away? Reliance on human food sources is a learned behavior over time. It is also a behavior that can be passed from generation to generation. Wildlife relying on human food sources ultimately struggle to survive in the absence of this unreliable source. Animals need to be able to survive on their own if they are forced to disperse through habitat loss or if they venture outside of human communities to mate. Young fox pups have been spotted in LaRC's North 40. We want to keep these fox pups free of human interactions so they can live long, *foxy* lives.



Fox near the Reid Center eating popcorn that someone had thrown out

Wildlife that is consistently fed lose their natural fear of humans. Unafraid wildlife will often approach people and can become dangerous. Have you ever been chased by duck or goose that thinks it is entitled to your lunch? Being approached by a strange animal can be a scary situation for everyone involved. An animal unafraid of humans can be mistaken as rabid, aggressive or mean, and then removed/killed for that behavior. An instinctive wariness of people is important to a wild animal's survival. The Center has had recent experience with this un-fearful wildlife behavior. A fox entered a LaRC facility following an employee who was carrying a fresh breakfast item. While the fox was persuaded to leave and was unharmed, it was a situation that could have been problematic. This is an example of a fox that has become used to humans for food.

Easy access to human food sources can unnaturally increase wildlife population numbers over time. The habitat may not be designed for this population and the wildlife become dependent on human involvement. In the wild, the number of animals being born is directly related to the amount of natural food available. This is nature's way of keeping a balance. When an unnatural food supply becomes available, animals may produce more young and the population can elevate to unsustainable levels. We want LaRC to stay as naturally balanced as possible.

The food humans usually feed to wild animals is not nutritionally complete for that animal. Some human foods can cause serious health problems for animals, especially when they are young and still developing. Most wild animals are opportunistic and will concentrate on the easiest food source available. When a constant human-provided food source is available, animals who would normally have a varied diet may switch to eating primarily this constantly available human food. Human food often bears no resemblance to what the wildlife would eat naturally, so they are basically eating “junk food.”

Wildlife can transmit disease, especially rabies. This is one of the most serious dangers associated with human-animal interactions. Feeding wildlife increases the chances of encountering diseased animals. In fact, raccoons and foxes are found to have the highest frequency of rabies infections in the Hampton Roads area. Both of these species are found on Center, and both have had conflicts with humans in the past. The good news is that there have been no recent cases of rabies infection in these species on the Peninsula. However, that does not mean that the threat is entirely eliminated.

Because of these compelling reasons discussed above, the feeding of wildlife is prohibited at LaRC. Let's all work together to keep LaRC wild!

Some tips to consider:

- Not all feeding is intentional. Is food being properly thrown out? After a picnic at the Reid Center are you cleaning up food debris? Think about your actions.
- If an injured animal is spotted notify Environmental (4-7517) rather than trying to help it by providing food. Often an injured animal can survive just fine on its own.
- Ensure your facility is not leaving garbage out in a manner that attracts animals. Report any dumpsters that you have a concern about to Environmental (4-7517).
- If a person feels threatened by an animal they should call 4-5500 and someone from Security will assist them.