

**Indiana Department of Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife**

Feeding Deer: Just Say No

Why do people feed deer?

Feeding wild animals can be an enjoyable experience. Many Hoosiers enjoy seeing white-tailed deer up close and feel good about providing an easy meal, especially when food is scarce. Hunters often put out corn or apples so they can learn about deer in their hunting spot. Unfortunately, despite the immediate pleasure for human and deer, feeding wild animals causes more harm than good.

Why shouldn't I feed deer?

1. Habituation

Deer that are fed by humans become dependent on the easy food source and stop foraging. Deer are much better at feeding themselves on their own. When you feed deer and then stop, or when the food temporarily runs out, they will go hungry and may become a nuisance as they search for more easy food. Once deer are habituated, they can become demanding, even bumping at doors and windows to get their expected hand-out. It may seem manageable to feed a doe with two fawns in the spring, but by fall they become three adults demanding dinner every day. Additionally, landscaping and vegetation can be damaged where deer are concentrated around feeding areas. Before you put out food for deer, keep in mind that they are wild animals, not pets, and it's better for you and for them if they stay wild.



Deer will eat anything near a feeding area, including items you don't intend for them to eat.

2. Disrupting their natural biology

It's easy to feel empathy for deer during a harsh winter, with no apparent food to eat. It may seem they depend on you to survive. Deer, however, are adapted for surviving long, cold winters in Indiana. Their fur provides insulation. Deer stock up on fat in the fall so they do not need to eat much in the winter. Additionally, their metabolism slows and they restrict movement to conserve calories. By spring, the deer

have slimmed down but are healthy. Feeding deer, especially with high-calorie food, interrupts this natural pattern and speeds up their metabolism, making them burn fat reserves faster. Unlike humans, deer have a specific blend of microbes in their stomach that break down their naturally high-fiber diet. These microbes take several weeks to adjust to new foods. During this period, deer are susceptible to corn-induced acidosis, which can cause diarrhea, dehydration and death. This creates a situation where you must continue feeding them through the winter, though they would have otherwise survived on their own before you intervened.

3. Spreading disease

Under normal circumstances, deer spread out when they forage. When deer are given supplemental food, however, they congregate closer than they would in the wild. Close proximity is a way for deer to spread disease. Though it has not yet been found in Indiana, chronic wasting disease (CWD) is spreading in the Midwest, and is a serious threat to deer. CWD spreads easily through saliva, urine, feces, and other methods and stays active and infectious in the soil for years. By not giving deer an incentive to congregate, you help slow disease transmission.



Deer will crowd around a reliable food source, becoming dependent on the unnatural food and potentially spreading disease.

4. Deer feed is unhealthy “junk food”

Several medical complications in deer arise from diets based on corn and pellets as opposed to natural woody browse. Acidosis, enterotoxemia, and aflatoxin all will cause 2-3 weeks of extreme discomfort for deer as the bacteria in their digestive system adjust to accommodate the new chemistry of the foreign food. Not all deer survive this transition, especially if they are already stressed from harsh weather or sickness. Even worse, deer go through the process again when they stop getting fed, making deer feed twice as harmful.

The Wildlife Management Institute offers an insightful evaluation of feeding wildlife as follows:

Supplemental feeding — however well intentioned — either compromises the animal's wildness or wellness, or it interferes with the essential natural processes of selection. For

the long-term benefit of big game wildlife populations, supplemental feeding is an accident waiting to happen. When and where such feeding is done, it is undertaken only — if not expressly — for the interest of people, because the fed animals almost invariably will not benefit and very likely will be harmed by the practice (Feeding Wildlife: Just Say No).

What can I do?

If you are already feeding deer and would like to stop, slowly decrease the amount of food you are offering. Do not remove all the food at once. This way, the deer will have time to adjust their browsing habits and learn to eat on their own again.