

Keep Wildlife Wild- Please Don't Feed Them

By Diane Tilton, AZGFD Education and Information

We love our wildlife here in the White Mountains but oftentimes, we do things we think are helping wildlife and we just end up creating problems for the wildlife and our neighbors. The Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) gets a lot of calls from around the state about nuisance animals. These calls vary from “neighbor’s bird feeder is attracting too many birds and they are creating a mess in their/our yard” to people feeding deer and javelina that are bringing in mountain lions.

I started my career with AZGFD as a wildlife manager (game warden) in the Tucson area. The two years I spent as the urban officer taught me a lot! For one thing, I got very good at herding javelina (imagine trying to herd cats that will bite through a neighborhood while the curious neighbors record you on their cell phones). Another thing I became very proficient in was working with people feeding wildlife.

People feed wildlife for two main reasons: One, they like to see the wildlife in their yard. Two, they think the animals need the food to survive. I can't disagree with the value of being able to sit and enjoy a yard with the sights and sounds of birds enjoying the food and water you've provided. But, putting out food for other critters is where we start getting into trouble.

In Arizona, it's illegal to feed wildlife, except for tree squirrels or birds, in counties larger than 280,000 population. That includes Maricopa, Pinal and Pima counties. Many counties and cities have developed their own local ordinances to stop attracting wildlife into urban areas.

In Tucson in Pima County, getting people to stop feeding javelina is a big challenge. The javelina herds would get large and often people would feel threatened by them as they were out walking. I once had a case where a woman was throwing food over the fence into the wash for the javelina. She tried to tell me she was feeding the birds but when I asked her what birds she was feeding cooked hot dogs, ground beef, cat food, popcorn and toast, she admitted she was feeding the javelina because she thought they would starve without her. I talked to her and explained that the javelina should be eating plants, not hot dogs and that she was putting the javelina and her neighbors in danger. I also explained to her that I was going to write her a criminal ticket if she didn't stop immediately.

Once AZGFD determines that a javelina or any other animal has exhibited unacceptable behavior, it would need to be lethally removed. That's easier said than done, since all javelina look alike and they are usually in large groups. Why do we lethally remove them and not just relocate them? Well, if an animal has been determined to exhibit unacceptable behavior, it would be negligent of us to move it and make it someone else's problem in the future. I once moved two javelina that were in the Tucson Botanical Gardens out into the Silverbell Mountains. About a year later, during a legal javelina hunt, the animal was harvested in Catalina and identified by an ear tag. It had travelled across I-10 and Oracle Road all the way to the Catalina Mountains. That animal was relocated because it wasn't aggressive, it was just in an unacceptable place and we didn't want to release it in an urban area.

So, why is feeding wildlife so bad? In previous articles, I've written about how to make your yard attractive to birds. Having a yard full of birds is quite different than having a herd of deer that come to your yard every day expecting food. There are several reasons why we don't want wild animals frequenting areas in association with humans. Wildlife fed by humans often reproduces at a higher rate and have a higher success rate with raising their young. Although you might enjoy seeing the deer and elk in your yard, your neighbors might not appreciate them eating their plants and leaving scat behind on their

porches. Also, more animals mean more vehicle collisions which are usually lethal for the animals and can be dangerous to humans as well. And lastly, all throughout Arizona, there are dangerous animals that can cause a great amount of fear or, in some cases, can cause physical harm to humans and our pets. When you bring in prey species, predators will often follow. If you have javelina or deer in your yard, they can attract hungry coyotes or mountain lions into urban areas where they are unwelcome.

This predator-prey cycle will even happen at your bird feeders. Coopers hawks are small hawks that catch smaller birds in flight. They will often perch near a feeder and eat the birds that are taking advantage of the free meals.

Social media often has videos of cute wildlife interacting with people. Sure, the videos make my heart melt a little thinking that I want to hand feed a cute raccoon. But no, these are wild animals and need to be treated as such. Please do your part and don't feed wildlife; you really are doing them a favor by keeping them wild! For more information visit our website at www.azgfd.com/Wildlife/LivingWith.

Upcoming Events in Pinetop

Bald Eagle Workshop

The Arizona Game and Fish Department will present their Bald Eagle Natural History Annual Workshop for the public at the Pinetop regional office at 10 a.m. on Saturday, February 4th. The program is free to the public and will consist of a classroom presentation and discussion of bald eagle life history, behavior patterns and their current population status in Arizona and North America. Liberty Wildlife will describe their work with eagles and will have a live eagle on hand to allow participants to see one up close. The presentation will be followed by an optional trip to Rainbow Lake to observe eagle behavior first-hand.

Participants are advised to dress appropriately for weather conditions for that day and to bring a set of binoculars or spotting scope for improved observation, if they have them.

Californian Condor Workshop

On Saturday, March 4th at 10 a.m., a presentation on California condors will be held at the Pinetop Regional Office. Alan Zufelt, the California condor project coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department will give an inspiring and informational talk about the history and conservation methods of the condor program and will give an update on the current population status.

Ducks and Other Water Birds Viewing Workshop

Waterfowl Viewing Workshop for the public will be held at the Pinetop regional office at 10 a.m. on Saturday, April 1st. The program is free to the public and will consist of a classroom presentation and discussion of waterfowl identification, life history, behavior patterns and their importance to wildlife conservation in Arizona and North America. The presentation will be followed by an optional trip to a local lake to observe waterfowl first-hand.

Participants are advised to dress appropriately for weather conditions for that day and to bring a set of binoculars or spotting scope for improved observation, if they have them.

To attend any of these workshops, please call the Pinetop Game and Fish Regional office at (928) 532-3680 to register. Registration is not required but is appreciated to ensure proper staffing.