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Loving Wildlife to Death,
Taking Kids Fishing,
Wild Turkey Hunting

Photo © Dean Cerrati

MASSWILDLIFE

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Features

On the Cover: A lone and independent young Eastern cottontail sits quietly, nestled in grass, by a fenceline in a suburban backyard. Photo © Troy Gipps

Loving Wildlife to Death:

Good Intentions, Bad Outcomes

by Meghan Crawford

Photo © Troy Gipps

If you are reading this article, it's fair to assume you are interested in wildlife, and you more than likely enjoy seeing most of the wild animals you spot around your home and neighborhood. You may even go as far as saying that you love wildlife. But the question I seek to explore with you is: Are you loving wildlife to death? As the Community Engagement Biologist for MassWildlife, I interact with countless well-meaning people who say they love wildlife, but, unfortunately, act in ways that cause individual animals, and even their local wildlife populations, to suffer. While good intentions are commendable, a person's decision to show their love for wildlife by handling, relocating, feeding, or otherwise altering an animal's behavior can, and often does, lead to negative consequences for the animal. So, our challenge is to express our love for wildlife while respecting and protecting its wild nature. In this article, we'll review the ways wild animals have evolved to survive in situations that might seem precarious to us and how we can shift our perspectives and decisions to avoid accidentally loving wildlife to death.

Wildlife and the Public

You are not alone in your fascination with wildlife. Recent research suggests that the public's interest in wildlife-watching is growing. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's *2022 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation* found over 148 million U.S. residents, or 57% of the population that is 16 years or older, participated in wildlife-watching in 2022. Watching included closely observing, feeding, or photographing wildlife, visiting public parks to view wildlife, and maintaining plants and natural areas to benefit wildlife. Other studies have shown that wildlife-viewing has the potential to grow more than other outdoor recreational activities as respondents reported higher future interest in wildlife-viewing compared to previous years.

There has also been a shift in the public's wildlife values. Colorado State University's (CSU) *2018 America's Wildlife Values Project* showed that 35% of the adults in the United States are categorized as "mutualists" in their wildlife values orientation, meaning they believe wildlife deserve rights similar to humans, are capable of trusting relationships with people, and are meant to coexist with people. According to the CSU project, 42.7% of Massachusetts residents are mutualists. People with mutualistic values are more likely to express anthropomorphic tendencies toward wildlife, which is described as projecting human-like characteristics, emotions, and behaviors on animals and other non-human entities. This may be why some people see wildlife as akin to a pet that needs our care, rather than the independent, wild animals they really are. The CSU project found that 67% of Massachusetts residents exhibit anthropomorphic tendencies. While it's worth celebrating the deep connection our residents have with wildlife, it is also essential that people hold their mutualistic inclinations in check to ensure that what we do to help wildlife doesn't result in the opposite.

Leave Young Wildlife Alone

Spring is what wildlife professionals sometimes refer to as "baby season." Unfortunately, every year, the lives of countless young wild creatures are disturbed when people with good intentions take young from the wild in a misguided attempt to save them. In reality, they are almost always kidnapping the young from their parents and, ultimately, impairing the young animals' chances of becoming normally functioning adults that possess the skills to survive. Wild animals brought into human care miss out on key learning experiences provided by parents in natural environments. Upon release, animals cared for by people may wander back into populated areas where their chance of being struck by vehicles is high and their lack of fear of humans can lead to people and pets being injured. Sadly, some young animals are never released back into the wild because they die in the hands of well-meaning people who do not

Photo by Martin Feehan/MassWildlife

Not As Nature Intended

Unlike the fawn on page 2, which was discovered, photographed, and left alone so its mother could return to care for it, this fawn was illegally taken into human care in West Roxbury. When MassWildlife's Deer & Moose Biologist went to seize the fawn, its health had already rapidly declined due to this unnecessary intervention.

possess the knowledge and skills needed to properly care for them. Compassion and a Google search of how to care for a wild animal is not enough to qualify a person for this challenging work. This is one reason why the possession of wildlife is regulated by law and why it is illegal for people to possess most wild animals without an appropriate permit.

The good news is, while a young animal without its adult may appear helpless, orphaned, or abandoned, this is almost never the case. Some species, in fact, receive no parental care at all. This is true for most amphibians and reptiles, such as snapping turtles that lay eggs in shallow nests and leave them to hatch on their own. Additionally, animal parents will often not be in the immediate vicinity of their offspring. Instead, they will distance themselves from their young to avoid attracting predators to an easy meal. Rabbits and white-tailed deer are great examples of this. They will hide their young, leave, and only come back to feed them a few times a day for very short periods. This behavior can fool people into thinking the kits or fawns have been abandoned or orphaned—but don't be mistaken: The adult is very likely nearby waiting for you to leave.

Fledgling songbirds can also trick people into thinking they need help. These young, fully feathered birds are often found hopping on the ground by themselves in the spring and summer, still unable to fly. While it may look like they need assistance, they are merely in an awkward "teenage" stage where they are developed enough to have leapt from the nest but haven't yet taken to flight. Not to worry; the parents are close by and will swoop down to feed

Photos © Troy Gipps

Respecting the Nesting Process

Each spring, countless Massachusetts residents call MassWildlife with concerns about young birds found outside of nests. If the bird is an unfeathered hatchling, like the American robin to the right, it can be returned to its nest so it can continue to receive parental care. If the bird is mostly feathered like the photo above, it is a fledgling and should be left alone as it learns to hop, forage, and eventually fly.

the fledglings when needed. If you do find a young bird without feathers outside the nest, you can try to return it to its nest. If you can't find the nest, you could create an artificial nest by securing a small basket or container, with drainage and filled with some type of natural nesting material, to branches in a nearby tree or shrub so the parents can find and care for it.

For all these species, it's tempting to stay nearby to make sure the parents return, but this will have the opposite effect. The adults will see you as a potential danger and will keep their distance until you have left the area and until enough time has passed following your departure to ensure they can return safely.

Occasionally, wild animals will abandon their young. This may happen when the young are unlikely to survive, or when the adults aren't able to care for them. Natural predation of young wildlife also occurs.

This is why some wildlife has evolved to produce large numbers of offspring or have multiple birthing or nesting cycles in a single year, to compensate for the losses. Although this can be difficult to accept, it's a normal part of nature that serves a vital role in the food chain and ensures that only the fittest individuals pass on their genes, which, in the end, best supports healthier overall wildlife populations.

We should always give wildlife the space it needs to successfully raise offspring. To do this, we must first recognize that wild animals take care of their young in ways that are vastly different from how people do it. This does not mean their parenting is inadequate, nor do humans need to interfere directly. If you are aware of young wildlife using your yard, for instance, you can prevent your pets from digging into nests or approaching, chasing, or hunting young birds or mammals there. In the rare case when you find a young animal with visible injuries or near its deceased mother, contact your local MassWildlife District Office or a licensed wildlife rehabilitator for advice before taking action.

The Ripple Effect of Relocation

Many people may not realize that relocating wildlife is not only illegal in Massachusetts but ineffective and harmful to wild animals. Imagine, for a moment, if you were removed from your home and randomly "relocated" to a place where you had never been before and were given no money, means of communication, supplies, or directions. It would be disorienting and stressful, to say the least, and locating and obtaining the basic necessities in this circumstance would be incredibly difficult. This also holds true for most species of relocated wildlife. When a wild animal is relocated, it may attempt to return to where it came from, increasing its stress level from travel and putting it at higher risk of vehicle collisions along the way. Animals may also have trouble finding food, water, and shelter in the unfamiliar place. Even if resources are readily available, the area is likely already home to other members of the same species, which may create competition and additional stress for both the newcomer and the resident animals.

Sometimes people relocate wildlife because they think the animal is in a "bad" habitat. This is especially common when someone finds a turtle or turtle nest in a developed area or not close to water and then gets the idea to move the turtle or its eggs to a nearby pond. Though you may find turtles in surprising places, like lawns, gravel pits, or roadsides, trust that the turtle knows what it's doing and leave it be. If a turtle is relocated, it has a higher risk of dying from predation in the new habitat or from being struck by a vehicle while trying to return home. Additionally, turtle eggs are not likely to survive relocation as they need to maintain their original orientation in the nest and the embryo can be easily injured by a person handling or moving the egg. The one time it's acceptable to move a turtle is when it is found in a road and only if it's safe for you to stop and approach the turtle. In this case, only move the turtle in the direction it was heading, off the edge of the road, and no more than 100 yards from where it was found.

Relocating wildlife can also spread disease when people unknowingly move sick animals to areas where a disease wasn't present. This unfortunately occurred last fall when a dead, rabid raccoon was found in Eastham with porcupine quills in its muzzle and arm. The presence of quills indicated that the animal was likely relocated to Eastham from an unknown location, as porcupines are extremely uncommon on Cape Cod. Before this incident, raccoon variant rabies had not been detected on Cape Cod since 2021, which also came from a suspected relocated animal. The decision to move these diseased animals put the health of wildlife and human populations at higher risk of this fatal virus in southeast Massachusetts.

Turtles Know Best

Helping turtles, like this common snapping turtle, cross busy roads—in the direction they are heading—is the only time it is acceptable for a member of the public to move a turtle. Turtles have relatively small home ranges and not all turtles are aquatic so moving them can cause more harm than good. For instance, the preferred habitat of the Eastern box turtle (inset, top) is primarily terrestrial, therefore, moving it to the general or specific aquatic habitats preferred by a painted or Blanding's turtle (inset, middle, bottom, respectively) can greatly reduce its chances of survival.

The moral of the story is, even though you may not witness the negative effects of relocating wildlife, it doesn't mean they are not occurring. While wildlife activity on your property can be inconvenient at times, it's important to remember that animals are there because they can find the resources they need to survive in that habitat. If you want an animal to spend less time in your yard, identify and remove what attracted it there in the first place. This includes food sources, like garbage or bird feeders, or shelter, like crawl spaces. If you have a garden that wildlife likes to snack on, invest in effective exclosures, like wire mesh fences, to keep animals out of the area. If you continue to experience conflict with wildlife in or around your home, contact a licensed Problem Animal Control (PAC) agent for assistance.

Wild Animals Don't Need Our Handouts

One spring, I received a call from a woman who had dozens of turkeys in her small, suburban backyard for over a week. She was understandably frustrated by their constant presence and bold behavior, and she was ready to rally her neighbors and start a petition to remove the birds. When I asked her a few questions, I learned that her mother, who lived in the in-law apartment attached to her home, was feeding the turkeys sunflower seeds every morning. Those turkeys weren't going anywhere! It turned out that the cause of the turkey trouble was inside her own house. The caller and I had a good laugh and brainstormed ways she could

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Wild Lawn Patches for a Backyard Bunny

Finding young wildlife in your yard, like the newborn Eastern cottontail shown above that I found last spring, can be exciting, but after such discoveries we face a choice. We can either let our emotions get the best of us and intervene, or step back and allow nature to take its course.

In this instance, I found a natural middle ground. I liked seeing the young rabbit, but I didn't want it to get accustomed to munching on my flower beds, so I decided to leave several large rectangular patches of my lawn unmown throughout the spring and summer months (See opposite page). White clover and several types of grasses and other wild plants flourished. These islands of tall grass, on my otherwise-mowed lawn, provided much-needed food and cover for the young rabbit, which grew to adulthood in my yard over the course of last year. The patches were also visited frequently by woodchucks, striped skunks, opossum, and countless pollinators, including bumblebees. The rabbit did eat my violets a few times, but it mostly munched on the white clover. — Troy Gipps, Editor

Photos © Troy Gipps

Photos © Troy Gipps

by Troy Gipps

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convince her mother to stop feeding the birds so her family could once again use their yard in peace.

Unfortunately, intentional wildlife feeding like this occurs every day across the state. Though it may seem generous to feed wild animals, it's almost never necessary and can have serious consequences. Feeding wildlife alters an animal's natural behavior, may cause nutritional deficiencies, can increase the spread of disease, and results in competition and stress at feeding sites. While feeding wildlife can make a person feel close with nature, the best way to show love for wild animals is to avoid actions like intentional feeding that put them at higher risk of stress, injury, disease, and even death.

The impulse to intentionally feed wildlife can be especially strong during the winter. Yet wildlife in Massachusetts has evolved to tolerate very cold conditions and possesses the adaptations needed to survive without our help. Some mammals, like coyotes and raccoons, grow thick, dense winter coats to handle low temperatures. Birds will fluff out their feathers, trapping air underneath to create a warm barrier similar to a down jacket. Ducks and geese not only have down feathers to protect them, but they also rub oils on their outer feathers for waterproofing. Further, wildlife will decrease movement during the winter to conserve resources and, when animals are active, they tap into their stored body fat to give them the energy they need. When searching for food in the winter, they have plenty of natural options. Chickadees, sparrows, and finches inspect the ground and trees for overwintering insects, seeds, and lichen. Wild turkeys will dig into shallow snow to find acorns and nuts. Deer and moose digestive systems change in the winter to process primarily twigs, buds, and bark. This is why supplemental feeding can be especially harmful to deer, as their winter digestive system is not equipped to break down a high-carbohydrate, human-provided diet. The magnitude of the decision to feed deer in winter was demonstrated in 2015 when a New Hampshire town had 12 deer die within 300 feet of one another due to complications caused by the winter feeding of corn, hay, and deer pellets by residents.

No matter the species, intentional feeding leads to habituation. Habituation is when wildlife get unnaturally comfortable near people and their homes, usually because individual animals find easy food sources in neighborhoods and backyards. Habituation is bad for both wild animals and humans. It changes the animal's relationship with humans, often causing wildlife to approach people for food or potentially exhibit bold behavior. Some of the most difficult cases of this occur on golf courses, where golfers toss food to wildlife, like coyotes, for a quick laugh or to get rid of food scraps. But it's not so funny when that coyote learns to approach the next unsuspecting golfer, or the residents in the surrounding neighborhood, in search of food. Feeding wildlife is also a dangerous act, as animals carry disease that can spread to people through close interactions. Intentional feeding and habituation can also have fatal outcomes for wildlife. If an animal, like a turkey, coyote, or bear, becomes so bold that it's considered a threat to human health and safety, it may need to be euthanized. In the end, this is not the fault of the animal. The responsibility here lies with the people who are teaching animals these ill-fated behaviors by feeding them.

The best way to avoid these mistakes is to never purposely feed wildlife. You can make an even bigger impact by reminding your family, friends, and neighbors that Massachusetts wildlife does not need handouts from people, even during the winter. If you're aware of intentional feeding in your neighborhood that could lead to a public-safety concern, contact your local police department or board of health for assistance. If your town is considering a by-law or ordinance to address egregious, intentional wildlife-feeding by

residents, take time to review the proposal and demonstrate your support for it.

Bird Feeders, Disease, and Rodenticide

Over 50 million Americans purchase more than 1 billion pounds of bird seed and suet annually. You may be one of them. I used to be until I learned that bird feeders, or what some biologists refer to as wildlife feeders, undoubtedly cause more harm than good for wild animals. While feeders have some benefits for birds, they contribute to the largest sources of wild bird mortality in North America: window strikes and predation by outdoor cats. They are also a main driver for human-wildlife conflict. Let's be honest—bird feeders do not only attract songbirds. Wild turkeys and small mammals, like mice, chipmunks, and squirrels, are attracted to these feeding stations, too. Then come the predators, like foxes, coyotes, and bobcats, all hunting those smaller animals. Black bears will also routinely visit (and destroy) bird feeders for a quick, easy meal, even during the day. A black bear that learns to visit backyard bird feeders may eventually come to find a neighbor's unprotected livestock, potentially losing its life as a farmer takes lethal action to protect their property. MassWildlife saw this exact situation result in the orphaning of four bear cubs in Athol this year. The mother bear was ultimately killed while raiding a chicken coop, but this learned behavior of searching for food in a suburban area started with visiting "harmless" bird feeders. Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common occurrence, but the root cause is always the same: People feeding wildlife out of love, and wildlife paying the ultimate price.

Bird feeders and feeding platforms are also hotspots for disease. Many wildlife diseases are spread by physical contact between healthy and sick animals. Bird feeders gather animals in unnaturally high concentrations, creating a place for disease to spread quickly and cause greater harm. This effect has been observed with the growing number of occurrences of

Feeding More Than Songbirds

Photo by MassWildlife Archives

Photo © Gary B. Wise, Jr.

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Photo © Troy Gipps

Photo © Kaitlin Blasko

Habituation Hurts

Wild animals become less cautious around, or habituated to, people when they find easy meals in neighborhoods. Drawn initially to bird feeders, the wild turkeys above are part of a flock that routinely slows traffic in Northborough. They approached this vehicle to challenge their own reflections, which they view as intruding birds. The black bear above was first photographed in Granby and South Hadley visiting bird feeders (see photo on page 11) but quickly became a repeat chicken coop raider. The bear was ultimately killed for this learned behavior, likely by someone who took lethal action to protect their property.

avian pox in Massachusetts' wild turkey population. Not to be confused with avian flu, avian pox is a highly transmissible disease that is spread by biting insects, direct contact between sick and healthy birds, and contact with heavily contaminated surfaces, like feeders and perches. Over 200 species of wild birds, including finches, mourning doves, and wild turkeys, have been reported with avian pox. Infected birds can have wart-like growths on unfeathered parts of the body, inside the beak, and within the respiratory tract. This can impair their vision, feeding, and breathing. Mild cases may resolve on their own; however, severe cases can be fatal. Avian pox is not a threat to human health, but it is becoming more common in wild turkeys, particularly in areas where they are gathering at intentional feeding sites or bird feeders.

Another clear connection between feeding and wildlife health is mange. Mange is a contagious skin disease caused by microscopic mites that affects domestic and wild animals, including foxes, coyotes, squirrels, raccoons, and others. Mange-infected animals experience hair loss or thinning, scabbing, and flaky skin. While individuals with healthy immune systems can recover from mange on their own, some will die from the infection. Although it's natural to have moderate levels of mange on the landscape, wildlife feeding can cause an increase in spread and mortality because of the higher likelihood of animals encountering one another at a feeding site. The public should never attempt to medicate or trap animals infected with mange. It is illegal, can further spread the disease, and has many negative and potentially lethal side effects for both wild and domestic animals. The challenges of treating mange in wildlife are always hard for the public to accept. I remember one call from a distressed teenager about a young fox in her neighborhood that was showing signs of mange. She'd watched this fox grow up, as her neighbor had been feeding the fox kits popcorn in his backyard every night. The neighbor's decision to purposely feed the foxes put the animals' health at risk by gathering

wildlife together and creating a place for mange to easily spread. This teenager was now witness to the repercussions of the neighbor's choice and, regrettably, learned that there was not an immediate solution to the problem.

Fortunately, animals can recover from mange if their immune systems are healthy. Yet, there are decisions people make that negatively affect a wild animal's immune system. One prominent example of this is the use of rodenticide. Rodenticides, especially second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs), are commonly used by individuals and businesses for rodent control. Unfortunately, the mice and rats that consume rodenticide can still be eaten by carnivores, such as foxes, raptors, fishers, bobcats, coyotes, and more. If predators consume enough rodenticide-ridden meals, they can get secondary poisoning. Secondary poisoning from SGARs can result in the death of wildlife, as was the case for two bald eagles in Massachusetts in 2021. In other circumstances, secondary poisoning can weaken an animal's immune system. If an animal's immune system is compromised from secondary rodenticide poisoning, it may be unable to recover from otherwise moderate diseases like mange. If you need to manage rodent problems on your property, first remember that bird feeders attract, produce, and support high rodent populations, so take down your feeder and secure all food sources, like garbage, pet food, and compost, around or in your home. Additionally, avoid rodenticide, especially SGARs, and try alternative control measures, like baited snap traps, to reduce the risk of harm to non-target species.

Even with these fatal costs at stake, people continue to adorn their yards with tubes of seed and cages of suet. If you want to support healthy wildlife populations, toss out your feeders and help local birds by growing native plants, trees, and shrubs or maintaining a clean bird bath. If you have a cat, keep it indoors or directly supervise it whenever it is outside to prevent it from hunting and killing songbirds and small mammals. Instead of having birds come to you, go to bird-friendly natural habitat, like MassWildlife Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). The Leyden and Frances Crane WMAs are great for birding, especially during the spring migration from mid-April to mid-May.

Protecting the Wild Nature of Wildlife

With Massachusetts being the third-most-densely populated state in the nation, human-wildlife interactions are inevitable. For many, the chance to see wildlife and to observe natural behaviors can be an exciting experience. However, it's up to us to make small, daily choices that help, and not harm, these animals. Wildlife is exactly that: wild life. Though you may be tempted to view them as pets—with human-like characteristics—wild animals have evolved to roam free and care for themselves. They don't need our love in the form of handouts or misinformed rescue attempts. Luckily, there are other ways we can show love for wildlife that make a difference. Start locally by planting a native pollinator garden or advocating for nearby land protection and habitat restoration that supports a diversity of wildlife. If you like spending time in nature, join a community clean-up event or contribute to a participatory science project, like recording your wildlife sightings using the iNaturalist app. If you'd like to provide financial support for rare species conservation, consider donating to MassWildlife's Endangered Species Fund by visiting **mass.gov/nhesp**. Maybe most importantly, by avoiding actions that alter wildlife behavior for your own benefit and instead making decisions to improve natural habitat, you can ensure that you won't be the next person to love wildlife to death.

About the Author

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Boston-based wildlife photographer Moss Lynch of @wildlifeboston was fortunate to get this photograph of an American oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) and its 2-day-old chick on their nest in Winthrop last summer. This species is rare in the Commonwealth but is increasing in abundance and distribution along our coast. The most recent Mass-Wildlife American oystercatcher summary reported at least 202 pairs statewide.