

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

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*“Bird Feeders: Helpful or Harmful?”*

Bird feeders can allow homeowners to enjoy wildlife in their backyard, but may also attract predators and wildlife, such as racoons and deer. Bird feeders are a great way to enjoy nature without leaving your front porch, and many homeowners understand the joys of seeing multiple bird species frequent the feeders. However, actions all have some sort of reactions. Some are positive and some can be negative.

For example, racoons are seven times more likely to enter the yard and deer are two times more likely if you have a bird feeder. The deer might not seem so bad to most people. However, if you have young trees you are trying to establish, drawing deer to your home landscape can be detrimental to their health. Deer like to utilize young trees as a snack or by rubbing their antlers along the young tender bark of a tree, often times compromising the long-term health of the tree. Establishing trees is an often times costly and timely project. Other species we can see with increased frequency are carnivores like coyotes and red foxes. It can go without saying, but increasing the food source for the birds increases the food source for these predators by concentrating it in one location. A buffet line if you will.

Something else to consider is that an increase in the racoon population may lead to an increase in your trash being scattered throughout the driveway or yard. If you feed your dogs or cats outside, then that feed may end up going to your wildlife population instead of your pets, as well.

Many homeowners worry about birds being hungry during the winter. However, that is not the case. A study that looked at birds' reproductive performance showed that birds being fed in the winter time hatched chicks that weighed less and had a lower survival rate than birds that did not have access to feeders. Concentrating the birds in one area around a feeder can also be a hot spot for parasites and diseases. Two examples from scientific studies show an increase in diseases like avian pox and infections of lice and mites.

If you want to continue using feeders and keeping birds coming around, it is suggested to wash bird feeders thoroughly every 24 hours with 10% bleach, and rinse them well to remove that bleach odor.

Information comes from K-State Wildlife Specialist, Drew Ricketts.