

Feathered Neighbours: to feed or not to feed

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Abstract: The paper discusses public attitudes and private behaviours regarding the issue of feeding neighbourhood wild birds. Different motivations are investigated. A view of animals' capacities derived from the philosophy of David Hume is shown to make sense of the widespread behaviour of people who cultivate relationships with wild and semi-wild animals in their backyards.

1. Public Attitudes

Different countries have very different attitudes on how humans should relate to nature and its nonhuman life. Radically different environmental policies are adopted in different places, and seemingly opposite recommendations are often given to the public on how they should relate to wild animals living in close proximity to humans. This lecture focuses on the issue of people feeding wild birds, especially wild birds who visit people's private living space, such as their backyards or balconies.

In the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the United States, backyard (or indeed balcony) feeding of wild birds is widely encouraged by conservation agencies and animal welfare organizations. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) – currently “Europe's largest nature conservation charity, with over 1.1 million members” (RSPB 2016) – advises the public that “Although winter feeding benefits birds most, food shortages can occur at any time of the year. By feeding the birds year round, you'll give them a better chance to survive the periods of food shortage whenever they may occur” (RSPB 2009b). In the UK feeding wild birds is also considered an educational as well as pleasurable activity. According to the RSPB, “over half of adults in the UK feed birds in their garden. [...] Providing birds with supplementary food will bring them closer for you to marvel at their fascinating behaviour and wonderful colours. It will also reward them for sharing their lives with you. Feeding birds is also an ideal way to enthuse children about wildlife” (RSPB 2009a).

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) – the nation's largest animal protection organization – acknowledges that “Experts disagree about whether backyard bird feeding will significantly help bird populations”. Nevertheless, it supports the practice because “feeding certainly can help individual birds in your neighbourhood. The general rule for feeding of any wild animal is: do not feed when it might cause harm. With birds there are few situations in which we can imagine harm being caused, so we say, go ahead!” (HSUS 2016a). February is the National Bird-Feeding Month in the United States, the aim of which is to encourage individuals to provide supplementary food, water, and shelter to help wild birds survive during one of the most difficult months in the region (Ogden 2012, cf. Horn 2010). People are encouraged to provide for wild birds in summertime too! The HSUS recommends the provision of bird baths in hot weather for example: “Summer is upon us and when the temperatures soar, humans are not the only ones desperate to cool off. [...] Birds will totally use a backyard bird bath to have a drink and cool off” (HSUS 2016b). According to industry estimates, in year 2014, over 42% of households in the United States bought wild bird feed at least sometimes, and the country spent over \$5 billions in total on wild bird feed and feeders (Wild Bird Feeding Industry 2015).

In New Zealand, supplementary feeding of wild birds is encouraged by the Department of Conservation. The Department recommends the public: “try sugar water. [...] Make a pine cone bird feeder”, and provides on its website a recipe for a making bird feeder, as well as instructions on where to place feeders for visiting wild birds (Department of Conservation of New Zealand 2016a and 2016b). Like many other animal welfare and wildlife conservation organizations, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPAC) of Otago – a local branch of the national SPAC of New Zealand – recognizes that supplementary feeding benefits not only wild birds, but also the humans who feed them: “Putting out food for garden birds helps

them get through the winter. It's good for the birds, and it can be interesting to watch them feed at the table. Bird table activity can be especially entertaining for elderly people and anyone confined indoors" (SPAC Otago 2015). A number of studies have shown that wild bird watching and feeding promote the physical as well as the mental wellbeing of people (especially elderly people and those confined indoors), and that people evidently derive meaningful and diverse psychological rewards from maintaining a bird feeder (Banziger and Roush 1983, Lawrence 1989, Horvath & Roelans 1991, Beck *et al.* 2001).

It is important to note that those organizations supportive of supplementary feeding of wild birds invariably advocate the practice of *responsible and safe feeding*, e.g., in terms of food nutrition and reliability, hygiene and safety of the feeding place, and they also encourage the creation of *humane backyard*, e.g., via planting native bushes, trees, or flowers, putting up birdbaths or other water features, skipping lawn chemical, keeping cats indoor, making windows bird-safe (see e.g., RSPB 2009a, HSUS 2016a and 2016c, SPCA Otago 2015, and Department of Conservation of New Zealand 2016c, Johnson 2009, Huizen 2015, Wilderness Awareness School 2016).

In Australia, the traditional and dominant message from authorities on how humans should relate to wild birds is quite different. Although the idea of the humane backyard (passive engagement) is generally endorsed by authorities, wild bird feeding (active engagement) is generally discouraged explicitly and condemned implicitly. "If you love them, don't feed them" according to the authority of Centennial Parklands, a collection of three public parklands in Sydney (Centennial Parklands 2015). Likewise, the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) strongly advises against feeding wild birds: "When you feed native animals you're giving them the wildlife equivalent of junk food. [...] This can make them very sick. [...] a moment's pleasure for you may lead to the animal you feed becoming addicted to junk food" (OEH 2014). Similarly, the Bankstown City Council in NSW advises the public "Don't feed wildlife. [...] Teach your friends and neighbours about not feeding our wildlife. Remember wildlife should be admired and respected at a distance" (Bankstown City Council 2016). The Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR) of South Australia also maintains the view that "By feeding them [native wild animals] we are actually doing them, and the environment, more harm than good" (DEWNR 2016).

So, why do the Australian authorities hold radically different views regarding supplementary feeding of wild birds in comparison to their counterparts in the United Kingdoms, the United States, and New Zealand? What follows is a list of common reasons given by Australian authorities against feeding wild birds. Ways in which feeding can harm wild birds and the environment include: causing poor nutrition if unhealthy or poisonous food is fed to the birds; spreading disease if the feeding area is contaminated by sick birds; making the birds 'lazy' and dependent on 'hand outs' from humans; disrupting the birds' natural foraging ability and therefore reducing their ecosystem services, such as pollination and dispersing plants seeds; increasing risk of predation on the birds since food left over in the feeding area can attract pests and vermin, like foxes, which prey on birds; reducing the birds' natural fear of humans, which can lead them to danger if they approach people who are unfriendly or violent with them; and helping the more audacious bird species to multiply and thereby potentially altering the balance between native and introduced bird species (Galbraith 2015). Those who object to feeding wild birds also argue that the practice can harm people as well. For example: being accustomed to being fed, wild birds can become a nuisance or 'pests' who harass people and small children for food; a large flock of certain species of wild birds visiting an area a feeding site can cause property damage in the area (Temby 2003); and wild birds defecating on lawns and walkways can reduce water quality and other environmental quality in residential areas. Those who object to people feeding wild birds often also share the view that "Rarely if ever do suburban birds need hand outs. Birds that beg for food are not starving; many are not even hungry; they're just lazy and taking advantage of a free meal" (Wild Bird Rescues, Gold Coast 2016).

Many of the above listed risks and concern from the Australian authorities are genuine and valid. The practice of responsible and safe feeding as recommended by their counterparts in the United Kingdom and the United States, for example, is designed precisely to manage those risks and concerns. However, the notion of responsible and safe feeding is almost absent from the dominant Australian discourse on the issue. On the few occasions where some Australian authorities reluctantly advise the public on how

feeding can be better carried out with respect to the welfare of wild birds, a better feeding practice is considered as the lesser of two evils (see e.g., Centennial Parklands 2015, Birds in Backyards 2016). One might wonder whether the anti-feeding Australian authorities believe that it is harder to deal with Australian wild birds or rather they believe that it is harder to motivate Australia feeders to practice responsible and safe feeding. It is particularly interesting to observe how the almost moralistic discourse on wild birds becoming “lazy” and dependent on “hand outs”, and “taking advantage of a free meal”, mimics the social-political discourse suspicious of the worthiness of welfare recipients and panhandlers (cf. Jütte 1994).

2. Private Behaviour

We have looked at recommendations from authorities on the issue of feeding wild birds in several countries. We should now look at how people in those countries actually behave in relation to the matter. In Australia, despite the dominant advice from authorities against feeding wild birds, and despite the standard public disavowals and expressions of disapproval over the practice, supermarket shelves are stuffed with large quantities wild bird seed, and wild bird tables are for sale in nearly every outdoor shop in the country. A number of studies between 2003 and 2007 show the participation rate in wild bird feeding to be up to 57% in Australia (Jones 2011, cf. Rollinson *et al.* 2003). This is comparable to the participation rates for New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom, which have been estimated to be up to 47%, 50% and 75%, respectively (Jones & Reynolds 2008, Galbraith *et al.* 2014). The following table compares the participation rates of wild bird feeding and the pet bird ownership rates (see Pet Secure 2016) in the UK, the US, New Zealand, and Australia.

	United Kingdom	United States	New Zealand	Australia
Wild bird feeding participation rate	up to 75%	up to 50%	up to 47%	up to 57%
Human population (millions)	64 M	325 M	4.6 M	24 M
Pet/domesticated bird population (millions)	1 M	8.3 M	0.53 M	7.8 M
Pet/domesticated bird ownership rate	1/64	1/39	1/9	1/3

The United Kingdom comes out at the top on wild bird feeding (up to 75% of participation rate) and bottom on pet bird ownership (1 pet bird per 64 people). The United States and Australia are similar in their participation rates of wild bird feeding. But Australia has the highest rate of pet bird ownership among the three countries (about 1 pet bird per 3 people, which is surprisingly high)¹. It seems that as far as birds are concerned, the British feel the call of the wild to a far greater extent than they feel the need to domesticate or – some would say – to imprison. One hypothesis is that the enjoyment and satisfaction that people derive from feeding and interacting with wild birds reduce their desire for owning a pet bird. A growing number of wildlife experts in Australia are comfortable with humans participating in supplementary feeding of wild birds and other animals. Some of them now believe that “Feeding wildlife in the backyard is a very effective way of keeping them out of cages” (Roberts 2013).

A minority view has been emerging in Australia in the last decade or so, which is closer to the basic position held in the United Kingdom and the United States, namely, that it is harmless for people to feed wild birds – at least under some circumstances. Australian Horticulturist Don Burke, for example, argues that in general there is nothing wrong with people feeding wild native parrots and finches because their native food plants are long gone, and most of them would die out in many areas if people didn’t put seed out for them (Burke 2015). Regarding the popular fear that feeding wild birds might encourage them to become dependent on people for food, Australian behavioural ecologist Darryl Jones comments that “there is no

¹ One reason for the high Australian population of “pet birds” is that suburban backyard chickens are counted as pets, and a very high number of Australians keep chickens.

evidence of widespread reliance on the food we provide. Almost all species investigated still find and consume a diet dominated by natural foods, with the visit to our bird table a mere snack. Dependent on feeding? Apparently not among the birds, but widespread among the people!" (Jones 2014).

Why do people feed wild birds? In particular, why do a comparable high proportion of Australian households participate in the activity despite the country's predominantly negative public message against the activity? An 2004 Australian study (Howard and Jones 2004, cf. Jones 2011) shows that enjoyment derived from feeding wild birds (given by 75% of surveyed feeders as a reason) is the most significant reason or motivation for people to feed wild birds, while atonement for anthropogenic environmental damage (referred to by 39% of surveyed feeders) is the second most significant, and educational benefit (referred to by 30%) and assistance to wildlife (referred to by 26%) are also significant reasons. A 2014 New Zealand study (Galbraith *et al.* 2014) again indicates that enjoyment is the predominant reason why people feed wild birds, and that assistance to wildlife is a significant reason, but environmental atonement and educational benefit have both turned out to be insignificant reasons (with respectively only 2.2% and 2.4% of surveyed feeders referring to them).

Scientific research on how supplementary feeding affects the welfare of wild birds fed and health of the natural environment (such as, what effects the practice has on other animal and plants species) has been reported as scattered and inconclusive (Jones & Reynolds 2008). Alongside ongoing scientific investigations on these empirical aspects of the issue are a variety of philosophical and evaluative accounts on animals and nature, and on how humans can meaningfully relate to them. Examining and comprehending the issue from these angles will enrich our understanding of the issue.

3. Meaningful Relationship: Reflexivity and Empathy

The United Kingdom is famous for its partiality to animals, England being the source of the first animal welfare and animal cruelty legislation. Actor and animal welfare activist Joanna Lumley recently confessed that she not only fed the birds in her back yard but cared for several "completely charming" foxes that inhabit her London garden. She feeds them dog food, and lets them also explore the house, a recipe that the Daily Mail (19 May 2015) clearly disapproved of. Her words are quite interesting: "Foxes live in London, they're not going to eat sheep here, they're not going to eat chickens here because there aren't any." "They lived here before [us] and they are feral creatures", she told the *Mail*. "If we don't feed them they get mange and die and that's not fair. We have several that come around. I try not to name them but they live under the shed at the back of the garden. They walk on the walls and are completely charming." Apparently, they also came into the house and curl up on the sofa while her musician husband is practicing.

One common motivation for people to interact with companion animals, and, for some, with wild animals as well, seems to be a desire to form some meaningful relationship with the animals concerned. This is quite clearly the case when people make a conscious decision to invite an animal into their personal life and into their private living space, as when someone acquires a cat or a dog, or when a person approaches a wild bird or squirrel offering food as a befriending gesture. Often behind the attempt to build a relationship of this kind with an animal is a hope that the animal is capable of responding back in ways that would bear meaning to oneself and also in ways that would please or satisfy the animal. This is an attitude that goes beyond wishing what is good for the other, or valuing the other as an end in itself. It involves a desire for mutual pleasure for oneself and for the other in each other's company. There may also be an additional hope and need for reflexivity, where the gestures of and responses from each party are both the causes and the effects of that of the other (cf. Goodall 1967). The need for reflexivity is characteristic of the need for friendship. Reflexivity may lead to mutual satisfaction and pleasure, and it may not. As the relationship is lived, reflexivity may further lead to the enhancement of each party's capacity and artistry for pleasure, for satisfaction, and for reflexivity itself. This is no doubt an ideal of which most lived friendship fall short.

To what extent should a person hope for reflexivity in an attempt to form a meaningful relationship with an animal, especially when it is a wild or semi-wild one? No doubt there are objective hardwired biological and other kinds of limiting factors that affect how responsive to us an animal of another species is capable of being, and, for that matter, also how responsive it can be to members of other species as well as to members of its own species. Quite often however, we do not know clearly where those limits lie or how far they could be pushed without experimenting and testing what might only seem to be far fetched possibilities. It is not unlike ignorance we sometimes have about ourselves and about other people. We often do not know how far we could reach if pushed without repeatedly trying to go further. It is often harmless to devote a bit more effort and time into possibilities if one sees significant meaning in their realization.

The passion of wonder furthers possibilities of happiness both in the creation and realization of relationships. The “ever-present questionability of being” underlies our passion of wonder (Malpas 2006). Or arguably these are two facets of the same thing. Wonder provokes a desire to brighten up what seems murky, to comprehend what is perplexing oneself, and to be acquainted more closely with what might seem to be too far away. Wonder is possible only if one believes that such a quest for brightening, for comprehension, and for acquaintance could be brought to fruition. Wonder is not just curiosity. Essentially it requires a hope or confidence, sometimes not necessarily justified, for the better rather than the worse.

Friendship is not the only kind of meaningful relationship between people. How an adult relates to a small child in play, in mentoring, in caring, in worrying, in being frustrated or angry, and even in being distressed, are all venues for the adult and also for the child to find satisfaction and meaning - despite the developmental limitations on the reflexivity of the latter. The same is true of how people or beings of significantly different levels of mental capacities may meaningfully relate to each other. The sense of meaning derived from these asymmetrical relationships – which involves much opaqueness as well as glimpses of clarity – comes not just from the pleasure and joy that may result along the way. Crucially, the sense of meaning comes also from an increased self-understanding and self-discovery that one could realize as one persists with the challenges presented by a seemingly incomprehensible other (cf. Brennan and Lo 2014, chapter 4).

Regardless of how reflexive a meaningful relationship could be with an animal of unlike intelligence, typically implicit in a person’s attempt to build a worthwhile relationship with an animal are two attitudes. The first is an evaluative attitude of treating the animal as an end in itself having its own good, which is to be valued and attended for its own sake (see Taylor 1981 and 1986; cf. Singer 1975, Regan 1983, Plumwood 1993, Varner 1998). The second is a cognitive attitude of believing, or perhaps at least make-believing, that the animal in question is a conscious being as well as an empathic being capable of relating to oneself to some minimal extent.

The seemingly commonsensical idea that many animals are conscious and capable of experiencing a variety of feelings and emotions has not been commonly accepted by philosophers and scientists in the history of the fields (Descartes [1640] 2010–2015, Allen and Trestman 2016, Hatfield 2016 section 4, Carruthers 1989, Povinelli 1996). It has been reported by current authorities on the issue:

The topic of consciousness *per se* in animals has remained controversial, even taboo, among many scientists [...] Many philosophers and scientists have either argued or assumed that consciousness is inherently private, and hence that one's own experience is unknowable to others. While language may allow humans to cross this supposed gap by communicating their experience to others, this is allegedly not possible for other animals. (Allen and Trestman 2016)

Much ahead of his time, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume argued that many species of animals resemble human beings in both body and mind, and because of the similarities between us and those animals, we are able to empathize with them in the same approximate ways that we empathize with other human beings (see Hume [1739–40] 2001: 1.3.16, 2.1.12, 2.2.12, 2.3.10; Hume [1748] 1999: section 9; cf. Montaigne [1588] 1991, book 2, essay 11).

The notion of interspecies empathy finds strong resonance in Hume's philosophy of human nature, which has a strong focus on the continuity between humans and the rest of nature. For Hume, sound judgements on morals and values can only be formed through a process of informed and nonpartisan empathy with others, including empathy with nonhuman animals (Lo 2006). In particular, he argues that the sentiments developed during this empathic process can motivate us to act according to our moral beliefs, thus, uniting what we think and what we do (Lo 2009). Mutual empathy between a human person and an animal is essential to the kind of reflexivity required for friendship, and for making sense of many people's attempt to form a meaningful personal relationship with an animal. The joy that comes from meaningfully connecting to other forms of life naturally motivates us to make such connections with them. In this way, our sociability goes beyond our species boundary, to become a form of interspecies sociability.

The human capacities for empathy and for wonder, together with the desire for knowledge, make it possible for us to relate to animals in a rich variety of meaningful ways. Supplementary feeding of wild birds is one good illustration of this. For future directions, an account of environmental neighbourship as meaningful relationship – fostering caring, respectful and civil attitudes towards other co-inhabitants of this planet, whose capacities for empathy and reflexivity may be much thinner than our own – could be developed within the scope of environmental virtue ethics (cf. Brennan and Lo 2014, 2015, and 2016).

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