

Supplying water and food for free-living wildlife after natural disasters

Version 1.3, 20 Jan 2020

Introduction

This document is published as a **working draft** and will be updated periodically as new information becomes available. Please check the **WHA website** www.wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au for the current version.

Providing food for free-living native wildlife is generally not recommended. If areas of natural bush remain, there is no need to feed wildlife and it is best to allow wildlife to forage for food and water naturally. In times of natural disaster when resources are scarce, members of the public may want to help by providing food and water short-term, until natural food sources regenerate.

Take the advice of your local authorities and do not enter fire affected areas until it is safe to do so. Your safety remains the number one priority.

If you do supply food, please do so only with **authority of the landowner** (this includes for public land) and seek guidance from government websites (links below). The recommendations in each state or territory may differ, so follow the guidelines for your area. If you live near a bushfire zone, turning your property into a sanctuary for wildlife for a short-period of time (e.g. a few weeks) is one way you can make a difference until the Australian bush starts to recover.

We recommend you connect with your local wildlife volunteer groups, environmental groups such as [Landcare](#) and government agencies such as Parks and Wildlife Services and Local Land Services and partner with them.

Be aware of potential risks in offering food and water

The general guiding principle when providing food and water for free-living wildlife is “**FIRST, DO NO HARM**”. If you are not sure, it is better not to offer food, and concentrate only on fresh water. Many foods can result in serious illness or death. Over feeding can be fatal. For example, food that is offered to one species in small amounts may be harmful to another. Seek guidance from relevant authorities prior providing any food to isolated populations of threatened species as specific strategies may already be in place based on input from species experts, academics and land managers.

Dehydration is a major threat for wildlife in drought and bushfire situations. Most animals can survive for days or weeks without food, but dehydration can kill very quickly. **Fresh clean water** is the top priority and is more important than food, especially in early days of a response. Eating when dehydrated can lead to serious gastro-intestinal issues and can be fatal. Aim to allow animals to rehydrate first, then feed.

Hygiene and safety for animals are important considerations. Please also consider your own safety and well-being at all times.

Providing food (and to a lesser extent, water) brings **risks** of:

- Consumption of inappropriate foods for the animal, with a risk of serious illness and death
- Increased spread of infectious diseases
- Increased chance of predation
- Drowning or misadventure in unsuitable water containers
- Longer term malnutrition
- Increase in feral species
- Increase and spread of weeds to new locations
- Increased aggression within and between species
- Increased numbers of “bossy” species, reduction in “timid” species over time and disadvantaging more threatened species
- Long-term dependence on human-provided food and water sources.

How and what to offer

- **Fresh clean water is best.** Clean, disinfect and refill water containers daily, or use a [refilling water station](#), to prevent the spread of disease. Disinfect containers in a dishwasher or by soaking in a solution of one cup of bleach added to four litres of water.
- Always wash your hands before and after cleaning and drying food and water containers.
- **Do not add** electrolytes, “rehydration solutions” or sugar to water.
- Water containers should be shallow, robust and stable. Add a rock or stick or other material to give safe access for smaller animals.
- Place water and feed away from public roads, and in several small stations of low volume. A distance of 500 m between water stations is recommended.
- Provide water at both ground level (suitable for most mammals, birds and reptiles) and elevated in trees for animals which are reluctant to visit the ground (e.g. possums, gliders, some birds).
- Where possible, select shaded areas or clearings with a small amount of clear area around the water station, to encourage timid species and reduce predator risk.
- If offering food, regular move locations to reduce disease and predator risk.
- If offering food, always try to feed as close to the natural diet as possible (see key government weblinks below for further guidance).
- **NEVER feed: Bread, baked goods, avocado, rice, banana, onion, chocolate, sugar, honey, brassicas or dairy products.**
- **Do not** feed wildlife mixtures of peanut butter, honey and rolled oats (known as bait or wildlife balls) as they are harmful to some animals.
- **Do not** offer hays or seeded grasses, to avoid weed establishment.
- **Do not** throw bird seed directly onto the ground, always place it in an accessible container.
- Only offer water and food if you are able to check, clean and replenish on a regular basis, preferably **daily**.
- It is very important to **remove uneaten food** as well as clean and disinfect the food container daily to prevent the spread of disease and attracting unwanted pests. Don't throw uneaten food on the ground.
- Avoid providing food where feral animal populations may benefit, particularly pigs, goats and deer. These species can aggressively dominate food stations and threaten the recovery of native species. Feral Scan (www.feralscan.org.au) provides information on regional distribution of these species.
- Phase out water and food stations as conditions improve.

Useful weblinks

NSW government: “Helping injured wildlife” with details on suitable food for native species
www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/animals-and-plants/native-animals/helping-wildlife-in-emergencies

Tasmania government: “Wildlife and bushfires” <https://dpiwve.tas.gov.au/wildlife-management/caring-for-wildlife/wildlife-and-bushfires>

Victorian government: <https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/> - See “Feeding Wildlife”

Queensland government: <https://environment.des.qld.gov.au/wildlife/animals/living-with/feeding-wildlife>

Western Australia government: www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/wildcare-helpline

Birdlife Australia: <https://birdlife.org.au/media/after-the-fire/>

WIRES Blog “[Emergency Food, Water and Shelter for Wildlife](#)” and webpage on “[Let nature feed itself](#)”

Video on “Learn how to [create an arboreal drinker](#)”

See also “**Healthy wildlife, healthy lives**” www.healthywildlife.com.au/documents-to-download/#/ for suitable diets for different species of native wildlife.

In the long-term, you can aim to **make your property wildlife friendly**. Find out more about [living with native animals](#).



Find out more at www.wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au
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