

PLEASE DON'T FEED THE DUCKS

by C.J. Eccher

Ducks and other water fowl are common inhabitants of man-made city park and golf course lakes. They certainly add an aesthetic appeal to these natural settings, and duck feeding is a favorite park activity, especially for families with small children. However, when people feed ducks or when they become overpopulated, ducks can create adverse ecological conditions.

The lakes usually start out with a permanent population of domestic ducks that were added by the management. In addition, families commonly release their outgrown pet ducks in a park, especially soon after Easter when the cuteness of the gift duckling fades. Furthermore, feeding programs, either organized or incidental, encourage other migratory birds to stay. Overpopulation develops easily and leads to unhealthy conditions for all birds. Overpopulated domestic and hybrid ducks can develop avian diseases that can be passed on to the wild, migratory waterfowl.

The amount of fecal matter produced by an abundance of overfed ducks can add sufficient nutrients to cause severe eutrophic conditions in small lakes. The waste also contributes directly to the biological oxygen demand of the lake. Anaerobic conditions can develop with all the attendant symptoms such as unsightly water and obnoxious odors. Some city park lakes have developed into what is essentially a

poultry waste lagoon.

Some nutrient input cannot be helped and must be accepted. However, the excessive waste produced by man-fed ducks needs to be controlled if the management goal for the lake is to maintain an aesthetically pleasing environment. There is usually plenty of natural food for the ducks in the water, including insects and plants. Moreover, bread, the food of choice, is not part of a duck's natural diet. It actually does more harm than good, adding calories with minimal nutrients. Ducks that are not fed by man eat their natural diet and help keep the lake clean, but ducks that can get an easy meal of bread, no longer forage. Ducks are greedy and will consume great quantities of handouts and still feign hunger to encourage people to feed them even more.

Another very serious problem caused by feeding bread to ducks is avian botulism. Bread and other food missed by the ducks sink to the bottom of the lake, rot and collect botulism bacteria. The botulism bacteria may then spread to flies and maggots, which the ducks eat. In turn the ducks may become infected. Avian botulism is commonly known as limberneck disease because it literally causes a bird's neck to go limp.

People love to feed ducks, but if they knew of the problems they were causing, they might reconsider. Signs prohibiting the feeding of waterfowl are not always effective. Education through the newspaper, community flyers or on-site park staff may be the answer. The city or other lake management board may consider implementing a substantial fine policy for the feeding of waterfowl in situations that warrant it.

Lake owners with an existing duck overpopulation problem should attempt to remove waterfowl by all legal means but not without first contacting the local game warden.