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<u>Special Species</u>

It's Popular, Cheap, and Fun — But It Can Destroy Wildlife

Is this kiddie amusement idea really as benign as people think? It destroys these birds' ability to fly and makes them easy prey by causing undue stress and twisting to their wings. What to tell your children when they ask you to do this next time.

Reviewed by <u>Dr. Becker</u>

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Experts at the University of Tennessee want people to know that feeding human food to wild geese and other waterfowl can result in angel wing syndrome, a disfiguring and irreversible condition that inhibits the birds' ability to fly

- Angel wing is thought to be the result of too-rapid growth in young ducks and geese. The weight of the growing flight feathers places excess stress on muscles attached to the wing bones, causing the wing to develop abnormally

- You can help by not feeding human food to waterfowl, and spreading the word to family and friends

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 25, 2015.

According to experts at the University of Tennessee, the practice of feeding bread and popcorn to wild geese isn't the benign family activity most well meaning people think it is.

> *"That's not a good diet for them. As a matter of fact, if they are young and growing and they get a little too much of that carbohydrate they can grow too fast and get a condition called Angel Wing that makes it so they can never fly," says Dr. Cheryl Greenacre, with UT Veterinary Medical Center.*[1]

The condition called angel wing is irreversible, and it inhibits the birds' ability to fly. They aren't able to migrate with the rest of their flock, and they become easy targets for predators.

Causes of Angel Wing

Geese are grazing birds that get essential nutrients from the grass they eat. Obviously, white bread and popcorn don't fill the bill.

At Mallard Point Park in Hendersonville, TN, a handful of Canada geese were spotted with wings that "looked mangled and jetted away awkwardly from their bodies," according to the Tennessean.[2]

Experts believe the condition is the result of too-fast growth in young ducks and geese. The wings grow abnormally in a sort of downward and outward rotation. The condition is also known as airplane wing or slipped wing, and it has been present in waterfowl for decades.

When fed bread, popcorn or other human foods, the young birds grow faster than their wing bones can develop. The weight of the growing flight feathers places excess stress on the still-developing muscles that move the wing bones, causing the wing to develop in a twisted manner.[3]

Scientists have several theories to explain angel wing syndrome. It might be caused by excess dietary protein, carbohydrates or calories. It might be the result of vitamin deficiencies. Or it could be a genetic abnormality. However, UT experts believe it can only be caused by humans, and sadly, it can't be reversed unless the bird is still very young.

Possible Treatments for Angel Wing

According to Avian Web's **Beauty of Birds**, in a young bird, wrapping the wing and binding it against the flank for a few days, and switching to a more natural diet can reverse the damage.

If diet is the primary issue, they suggest reducing the protein by adding wheat to the birds' feed. And a diet with sufficient amounts of vitamins D and E, and manganese, may also be beneficial.

Sadly, in adult wild birds with angel wing the disease is incurable and usually leads to an early death.

How You Can Help

It's so simple … don't feed human food to waterfowl! If you want to teach your children to respect and appreciate ducks and geese, explain that wild creatures know instinctively what foods are best for them, and we shouldn't interfere with their diets and potentially harm them by offering human foods.

Sources and References

One Green Planet

[1] WBIR.com, August 12, 2014

[2] Tennessean, August 11, 2014

[3] Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife