

Should I feed ducks?

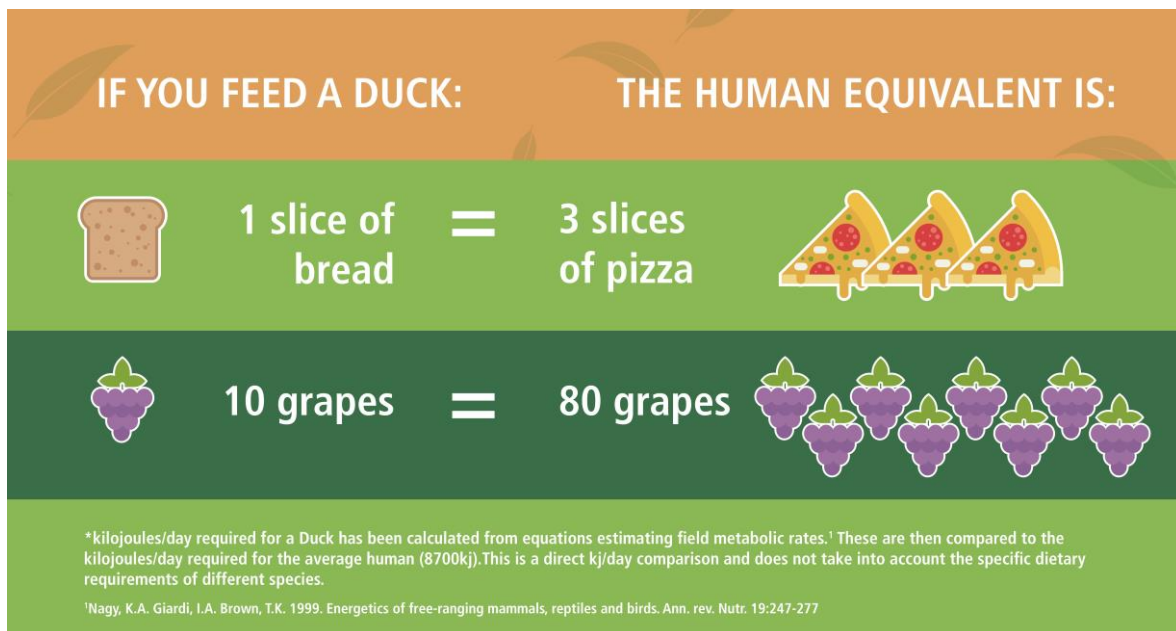
Offering ducks food is not recommended.

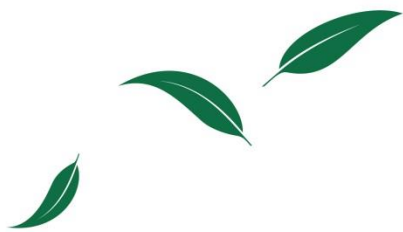
For many people, feeding ducks at the local park or waterway is an enjoyable way of interacting with wildlife. Offering food to waterfowl is a social activity that is often undertaken as a family.¹ However, feeding human food can lead to **nutritional imbalances**, increase the risk of **disease** and lead to altered **animal behaviour**.

Nutritional imbalances

Bread is often a favourite choice for feeding ducks, and a recent Queensland study found that people fed ducks an average of **4.9 slices of bread** per feeding session.² Bread is like fast food for ducks, of little nutritional value, and can make them **sick**.² Dabbling ducks, like the Pacific Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*), are mainly vegetarian. They feed on the seeds of aquatic plants supplemented with small crustaceans, molluscs and aquatic insects.

Remember birds are much smaller than humans so even **small portions of human food** can be very unhealthy for them.





Spread of disease

In many cases a large proportion of bread offered to ducks is not eaten. The Queensland study found that people distributed 6 ½ loaves of bread daily into the lake of one park, of which ducks ate 3 loaves.² The uneaten bread sinks causing nutrient pollution, which in turn leads to an increase in the soil bacteria that causes **avian botulism**.

While there is no direct link between feeding bread to birds and botulism, it can add to conditions which make birds sick.⁴ When water levels are low, the bacteria are concentrated, which causes infection as the ducks ingest mud when foraging for food. Ducks with **botulism become paralysed, unable to eat and drown**.

Disrupting animal behaviour

Further research is needed to assess whether feeding ducks can cause ducks to become dependent on humans for food or abnormally increase the local population density. There have however been reports of **aggressive behaviour** by ducks demanding food, putting young children feeders at risk.

Feeding ducks is not recommended. However, if you must feed them, you should aim to minimise the risk of harm:

- Completely avoid unhealthy (and potentially life-threatening) foodstuffs such as **bread and other baked goods**.



Bread

- Offer **small portions** of safer foods, and **not everyday**.
 - **Mealworms are a preferred option for omnivorous birds** such as ducks.
- Offer food in a way that **minimises the risk of harm**.
 - Stop feeding if the ducks are not eating food.

Source:

¹ Nagy, K.A., Girard, I.A., Brown, T.K. 1999. Energetics of free-ranging mammals, reptiles and birds. *Ann. Rev. Nutr.* 19: 247-277

² Chapman R. & Jones D.N. (2009), *Just Feeding the Ducks: Quantifying A Common Wildlife-Human Interaction*, *The Sunbird* Vol 39 No. 2, 19-28.

³ <http://www.birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/pacific-black-duck>

⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-09/bird-deaths-avian-botulism/5377918>