

# Caution: Feeding Waterfowl May Be Harmful!

*Regular Feeding  
Can Cause Dependency  
on People for Food,  
Conflicts with People,  
and Spread of Disease*



*The human future  
depends on our ability to  
combine the knowledge  
of science  
with the wisdom  
of wildness.*

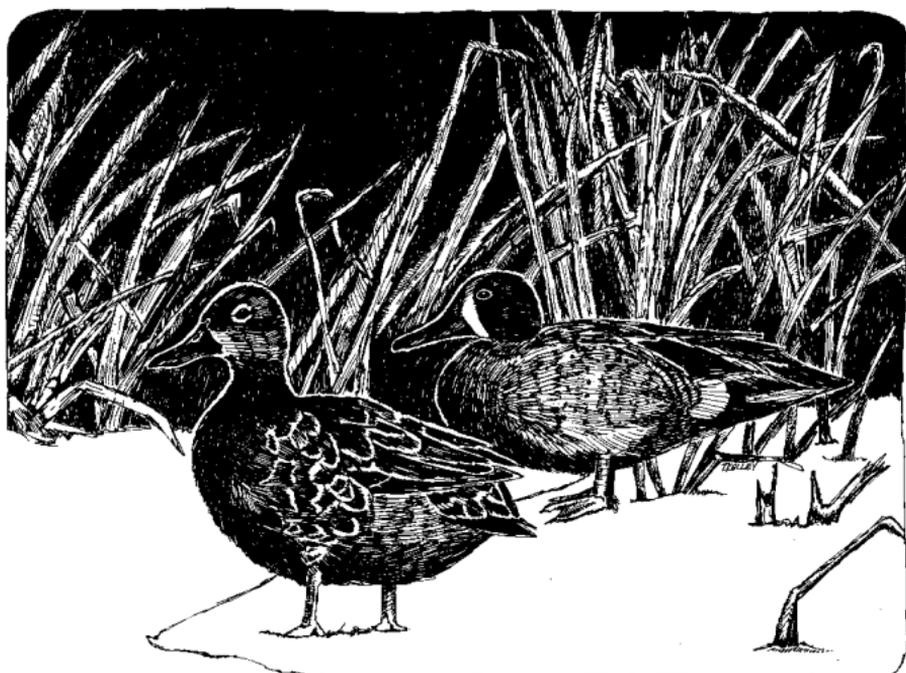
*Charles Lindbergh*



Over the centuries waterfowl have developed patterns of seeking out and feeding on highly nutritious marsh and grassland plants. These preservation patterns are passed on to each succeeding generation. Survival of waterfowl ultimately depends upon their ability to make use of food and habitat sufficient to maintain healthy populations.

In northern regions of the United States the extreme cold and blanketing snow of the autumn and winter months severely reduce the quality and quantity of marsh and grassland plants. Thus, each year most waterfowl, like many other birds, migrate tremendous distances south in search of food and habitat to carry them through the winter months. In the spring they again migrate, this time returning to their northern breeding grounds.

Not all waterfowl, however, complete the entire migration cycle. Many are sidetracked when they stop to feed and rest in the lakes and marshes found in suburban environments. There they are observed by city



dwellers who enjoy the beauty of these magnificent wild birds. And there they are fed by people who unknowingly are enticing the birds into delaying their migration or foregoing migration altogether.

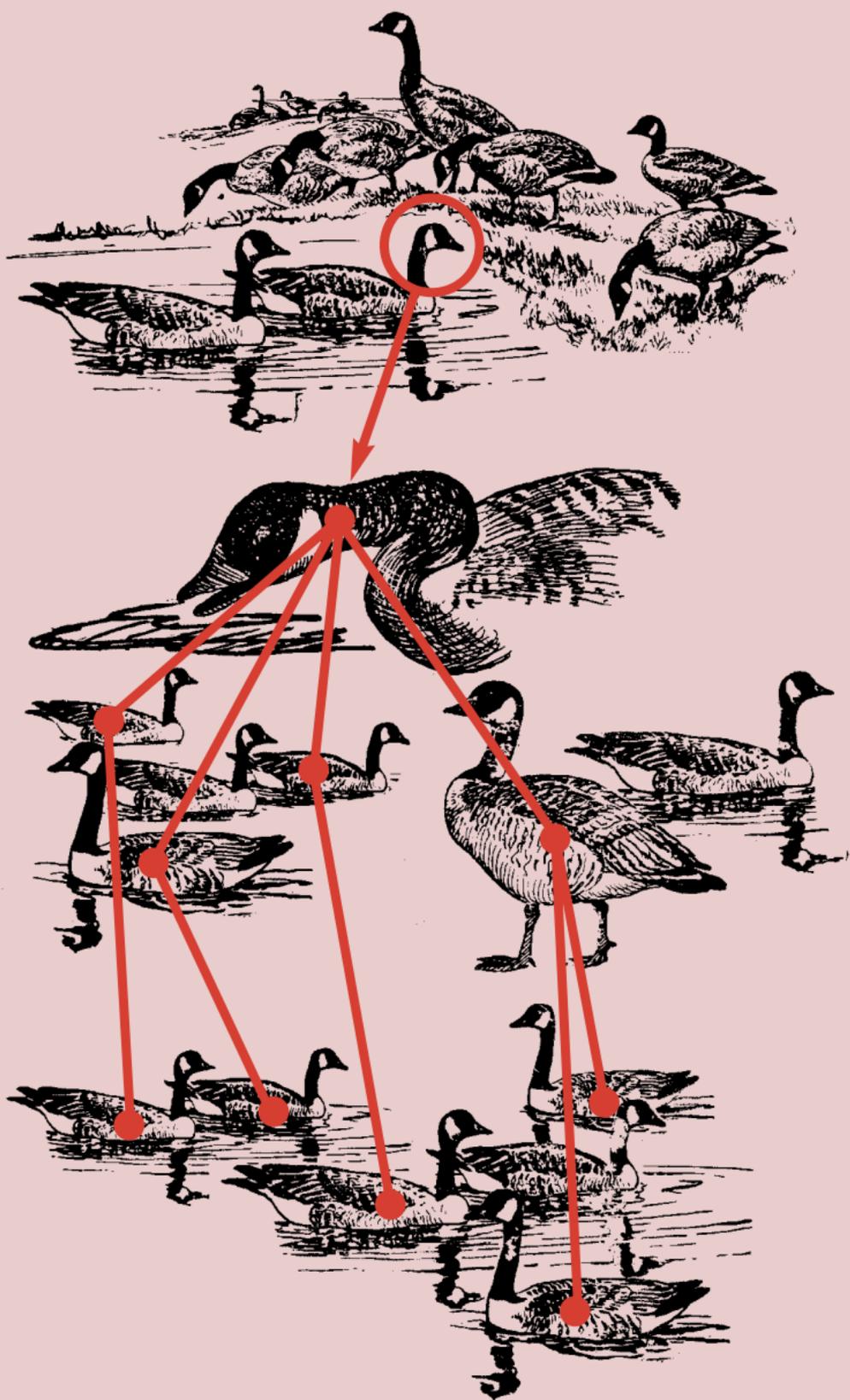
Many urban environments can provide sufficient space and food for *small* populations of waterfowl. However, as thousands of waterfowl concentrate in areas because handouts are easily attainable, the once *wild* birds can soon become tame, lose their fear of people and pick up habits that conflict with the human population and the birds' natural patterns of migration. Lack of fear of cars or planes can cause traffic and safety problems as birds stroll across roadways or fly across airport runways. Of increasing public concern is the damage waterfowl cause to parks, golf courses and residential lawns where large numbers of birds graze and defecate on the grass. Excess nutrients in ponds, caused by waterfowl droppings, may also result in water quality problems such as noxious algal blooms in the summertime.

Food handouts often result in large numbers of birds competing for very limited food supplies in small, concentrated areas. Such crowding and competition for food, combined with the stress of less nutritious food and harsh weather, increases their susceptibility to life threatening diseases like avian cholera, duck plague and avian botulism. These diseases have the potential to kill off large numbers of waterfowl.

The end result of this seemingly kind and generous act of feeding waterfowl can be a continuing cycle

---

## Transmission of disease through a flock of geese





of the birds becoming injurious to people and being subjected to diseases that can spread as easily as humans spread the common cold.

An infected bird may spread the disease to many other birds by infecting the water supply. When the birds are scattered over a large area this does not pose a serious problem. However, when the birds are bunched close together, their chances of contracting disease increase and the result may be disastrous.

**If you care for waterfowl, here is what you can do to help them retain their “wildness” and maintain their well-being.**

Stop feeding them! They don't understand the problem—you do.

Purchase a Federal Duck Stamp at post offices, many sporting goods stores, or National Wildlife Refuges or call 1-888-534-0400 to order by mail. Proceeds from the sale of these stamps are used to purchase wetland habitats that become a part of the National Wildlife Refuge System which provides habitat for the conservation of our Nation's waterfowl and other wildlife.

Learn more about waterfowl by visiting a library, nature center, museum, state wildlife management area or a National Wildlife Refuge. Or visit the Fish and Wildlife Service's Internet homepage at <http://www.fws.gov/>. Then teach others what you know.

*Painting by  
Robert Hautman  
for use on the  
1997 Federal  
Duck Stamp*

Preserve the spirit of America by allowing waterfowl to stay wild. Observe and appreciate them from a distance.



**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Office of Migratory Bird Management  
4401 N. Fairfax Drive  
Arlington, VA 22203**

**<http://birds.fws.gov>**

**April 2000**

