

Killing with kindness

– *overfeeding birds with bread at Ham Pond*

This article was prepared by an environmentally concerned group of HUG members, who are worried about the large amounts of bread frequently left around the pond, as shown in the photographs below taken at the end of April.

Many local people like to feed the birds, but some of our feeding habits are doing serious harm. Just because we see ducks and geese readily gobbling up bread, some people forget that bread is not the natural food of waterbirds. In fact, if all that these birds ate was bread, they could starve!



One reason for this is that bread swells in their stomachs, making them feel full and stopping them from eating the healthy, natural food available in the pond which they need for proper nutrition. Such dietary imbalance is especially damaging in the spring when they need extra minerals for growth and egg production.

Feeding white bread also leads to a vitamin E deficiency and protein excess, which together cause a condition known as 'Angel Wing'. This can affect one or both wings causing them to droop and turn outwards, thus crippling the bird and stopping it from flying.

Obviously, affected birds are easy prey for dogs and foxes. This explains why you may not have spotted affected birds. Similarly, bread is fattening, making it harder for waterfowl to fly and evade predators.

Feeding bread can also lead to other problems:

- Duckling malnutrition; in an area where ducks are regularly fed bread, ducklings will not receive adequate nutrition for proper growth, nor learn to forage for natural foods.
- Rotting bread kills off many pond invertebrates, which are

an important part of waterfowls' natural diet. This can also cause diseases; particularly deadly is duck viral enteritis, or inflammation of the intestine, which could kill all birds in the area in a single outbreak.

- Excessive bread also attracts foxes, rats, mice and insects, which can harbour additional diseases, some of which can also be dangerous to humans.

The good news is, there are plenty of alternatives. Environmentally conscious people feed the ducks and geese on waterfowl seeds

or pellets (which also float if they get into the pond), or best of all, worms and slugs from their own garden.

To encourage more people to understand the problem we propose to follow up this article by:

- periodically setting up a special table at the pond to distribute information and some pellets that are designed to provide a balanced diet for waterfowl;
- approaching at least two local shops to encourage them to stock suitable feed;
- having a table at Ham Fair to advertise the problems caused by excess bread, and sell packets of duck pellets.

We also hope to visit schools to carry this message to staff and pupils and set up a poster competition across the local schools. As soon as possible, we hope to publish a leaflet which will initially be posted on the HUG website and subsequently printed, to support these and future similar activities.

We would be pleased to hear your views and ideas on this and related issues.