

Habituation

Human-wildlife interactions are categorized as:

Avoidance: an aversion to negative consequences associated with a stimulus. Deer can learn to avoid touching an electrified fence.

Attraction: the opposite of avoidance, the strengthening of an animal's behavior because of positive reinforcement, and implies movement toward the stimuli. Cardinals at bird baths or feeders

Habituation: Unlike attraction, which involves a reinforcing stimuli, habituation is a waning of response to a repeated, neutral stimuli. Examples include crows ignoring a scarecrow, or a red fox ignoring the human activity of a suburban area

Habituation includes the animals' loss of their natural fear of humans – a very real issue as human developments encroach on wildlife habitat and as wildlife adapt back into suburbia. Supplemental feeding, whether intentional or not, is a common cause of habituation.

Supplemental feeding of wildlife pulls animals away from their natural foods and can lead to populations in excess of that for which available native foods can support. Once accustomed to supplemental foods, habituated animals become lazy, preferring handouts over foraging for natural foods. Habituated animals may also become aggressive. This may occur when a habituated animal encounters a person who does not feed it as expected.

Supplemental feeding may also endanger the wildlife. It may concentrate the animals in a small area increasing the opportunity for the spread of disease – a particular concern for whitetail deer. It is illegal to feed deer in Prince William County from September through April.

Or, the food may be harmful to other wildlife – unintended consequences. While ruminants such as deer are not very susceptible to aflatoxins (a family of toxins produced by fungi on grains such as corn), they are deadly for small mammals (e.g., squirrels and rabbits) and especially birds including turkey.

In the spring, habituated animals will be more aggressive in protecting their offspring. A normally docile doe now has two fawns which she will hide separately while she feeds. The fawns will remain still, even with a predator nearby. If a person is in the proximity of the fawn when the doe returns, she may interpret the person as a threat. Normally, this would result in a mock charge, attempting to drive or lure the person away from the fawn. A habituated doe has lost its fear of humans the charge and attack may be real. This may be someone looking at the fawn or completely unaware of the fawn's presence nearby.

Instead of providing supplemental feeding to the animals, remove invasive plants such as garlic mustard, autumn olive, and Japanese stiltgrass and/or promote native plants such as strawberry bush, viburnams, and greenbrier. Such native plants support song birds and other wildlife as well as deer.