

## Experts say feeding ducks interrupts their migration patterns and diets

by Kara Perkins/For the News-Miner

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Fairbanks resident, Pat Yates, feeds bread to a group of hungry mallards along the Chena River in October.

FAIRBANKS — Life on the Chena is pretty cush but ultimately unhealthy for a duck in the winter.

Each year a handful of ducks linger behind, enduring sinking temperatures, surviving on the goodness of human contributions of bread — and even grains in the unfrozen sections of the Chena River.

The human intervention is a problem, however, according to Mark Lindberg, a professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Human kindness, he said, has changed the ducks' environment and migration patterns.

Mike Petrula, a Waterfowl Biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, agrees.

"In general it's not a good idea to feed wildlife," he said.

The river stays open in parts during the winter because of warm water entering from the nearby power plant.

"Free and abundant food plus open, warm water is all a duck could ask for," Petrula said.

But Petrula warns bread is an inferior food source, lacking the nutrients ducks need. If the food source is taken away, or people, for whatever reason, abandon regular feeding, the ducks might not be able to survive.

For some residents, feeding the ducks seems harmless.

"It's just like humans, a fat duck is a happy duck," said Fairbanks resident Pat Yates, 67.

"A change in their diet doesn't hurt when they're going to stay anyway," said Yates, who believes the ducks would stay regardless of his bread-feeding.

Other residents don't think it is a good idea.

"I'm all about conservation, but I don't feel like it is my place to intervene," said Fairbanks resident, Jarrod Nash, 26. "I'm afraid it would create some sort of dependency on humans."

Residents might have conflicting views on this subject, but Lindberg, the UAF professor, believes people have created their own perceptions to justify their actions.

"I don't think anyone means poorly; they have what is perceived as the best intention," said Lindberg, who holds a doctorate in wildlife management and has studied waterfowl extensively.

"My opinion is that they don't need to be fed and if they weren't fed, they would leave," he added.

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So what is best for Fairbanks' winter duck population?

Lindberg believes if the ducks returned to their natural patterns, eating their intended food sources, their lives actually would be less stressful, and migration would be optimal when compared with the new life patterns caused by human intervention.

"We need to make a decision as a community," said Lindberg, who doesn't support a domestication of these ducks.

Lindberg and Petrula, the state biologist, agree making a choice not to feed the wild birds would be best, but they also understand the emotional connection for some residents.

"Who am I to say what the community must decide," Lindberg said, but "these ducks cannot live on bread alone."

*Kara Perkins is a journalism student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

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I have to admit also, that there are a LOT more important issues in Fairbanks than people feeding a few freakin' ducks.

I think it's the warm water keeping them here as well.

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The gift shop sells duck food in the summer that's more appropriate than the Wonder Bread most people feed those poor ducks. White bread is a horrible substance to feed ducks, not to mention humans. As far as hunting them, I wouldn't want to eat a duck that's been eating white trash bread all its life.

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Sure cuts down on the time preparing the stuffing..Keep up the good work.. Burp !!!!!

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