



Do You Know...about nutrition ?

There was a time when a trip to the zoo meant feeding the animals. I recall many such family outings and the fun we had throwing peanuts to the hippopotami, elephants, monkeys, and bears. Watching the hippo open its huge mouth, the bears sit up and wave, the monkeys reach their arms through the cage bars and the elephants using their long trunks to pick up a tiny peanut, were often the best part of the outing.

Today, feeding the animals at the zoo is strictly forbidden. Nutritionists carefully calculate the dietary requirements of the zoo animals and design feeding regimens to best meet the needs of each creature. If only one person tossed a couple of peanuts to the elephant, no appreciable harm would be done; however, with thousands of people visiting the zoo each day, a peanut from each person would fill even an elephant's stomach leaving no room or desire for a varied and healthy diet.

Animals have evolved over millennia to occupy a certain niche and exploit a certain resource in nature. Birds that eat hard-shelled seeds or nuts have developed powerful gizzards which act as grinding machines to process these foods. A Turkey gizzard can grind up 24 English walnuts, in the shell, in four hours. When an owl swallows a small rodent whole, its stomach processes the useful portion of the prey animal but bundles up the indigestible portion (fur, whiskers, large bones) into tidy pellets which are then regurgitated. Some birds which consume live insects have developed a special lining in the throat that prevent the squirming meal from injuring the diner.

In baby animals, proper nutrition is especially critical. A newborn squirrel will grow to independence within 12 weeks and that is slow compared to our favorite songbirds. A cuckoo weighs only 2 grams at hatching but will reach the adult weight of 100 grams within just three weeks. A Chimney Swift, hatched blind, naked and helpless, will fly off to independence in one month.

Baby birds are fed a diet high in protein, usually insects, even if the adults eat mainly seed. These hard-working parents may feed their babies up to 60 times per hour; remember that when your kids are running you ragged.

While baby animals need to feed continuously, most healthy adults can survive periods of fasting. Many animals can lose as much as 50% of their body weight and regain it with no problems when food is again available. Groundhogs may go four to five months without food or water during their winter hibernation. Mallards are capable of surviving, in cool air temperature (14 degrees, C) for up to three weeks with no food. Some birds, such as Swifts, Hummingbirds and Nighthawks, are capable of slowing their body processes to survive times of food scarcity.

Putting out bird feeders may help some birds survive a severe winter. Due to the fierce competition at most feeders and the limited capacity of the average feeder, birds are likely to find this handout to be a welcome supplement, rather than a substitute, to their normal diet. Black oil sunflower seeds provide needed protein but are also high in fat and fiber. Nut meats and suet are also good supplements for many birds. If you enjoy feeding birds, make sure you continue feeding well into spring. Late winter and early spring are the leanest periods because last year's seed is gone and the new crop has not yet ripened.

Feeding other animals is discouraged because, long-term, it generally creates more problems than it cures. Many people have started feeding a small family of raccoons only to find themselves tied to providing nourishment to 20 or 25 raccoons. The cost becomes prohibitive and the available habitat cannot provide for such a large number of carnivores. The population has gone out of balance because food was provided artificially and these animals are bound to get into trouble if the handouts suddenly stop. I have known people who felt compelled to cancel

vacation plans because they could not find anyone willing to feed the wildlife that had become dependent on their generosity. Similarly, feeding game species; i.e., deer, may take the edge off their normal wariness and leave them more likely to be killed during the next hunt.

And, finally, feeding ducks and geese bread is much like feeding peanuts to zoo animals. If only one person tossed a few pieces of bread to the waterfowl at a suburban pond, little harm would result. However, most of our ponds are frequented by hundreds of people many of which enjoy tossing their slightly stale bread to their feathered friends. Even the most nutritious bread will not provide all the nutrients necessary to keep these birds healthy. What bread will do is result in a sense of fullness in the bird so that it will cease to forage for its more normal, varied diet. Corn, cracked or whole, is not much of an improvement over bread. The key to a balanced diet is usually variety and animals must be stimulated by hunger to seek that variety.

Proper nutrition is a very complex science. Our wild friends have developed various strategies and adaptations which assure they will obtain a diet suitable to their specific needs whether it be winter or summer, breeding or non-breeding season, molting or fully feathered, growing or mature. Watch nature, enjoy nature and practice non-interference; it will be easier on you and better for them.
Now you know!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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