

Supplying water and food for free-living wildlife after natural disasters

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Introduction

This document is published as a **working draft** and will be updated periodically as new information becomes available. Please check the **WHA website** www.wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au for the current version. This information was collated with the generous and coordinated support of a team of ecologists, wildlife veterinarians, wildlife nutritionists and wildlife rehabilitators throughout Australia.

Providing food for free-living native wildlife is generally **not** recommended. If areas of natural bush remain, there is no need to feed wildlife and it is best to allow wildlife to forage for food and water naturally. In times of natural disaster when resources are scarce, members of the public may want to help by providing food and water short-term, until natural food sources regenerate, usually no more than a few weeks. It is vital that any help provided does not jeopardise natural recovery and feeding is phased out as soon as natural recovery begins. Prior to providing food for wildlife, take all necessary steps to minimise the risks outlined.

The commonwealth website provides excellent information on how to assess if help is needed for wildlife, and when and how to reduce and remove support for free-living wildlife after natural disasters www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/animals-and-plants/native-animals/helping-wildlife-in-emergencies

Always take the advice of your local authorities and do not enter fire affected areas until it is safe to do so. Your safety remains the number one priority.

If you do supply food, please do so only with **authority of the landowner** (this includes for public land) and seek guidance on what and how to feed from government websites (links below). The recommendations in each state or territory may differ, so follow the guidelines for your area. If you live near a bushfire zone, turning your property into a sanctuary for wildlife for a short-period of time (e.g. a few weeks) is one way you can make a difference until the Australian bush starts to recover. Seek guidance from relevant authorities prior providing any food to wildlife after natural disasters (particularly for threatened species) as specific strategies including regulated feeding programs may already be in place.

We recommend you connect with your local wildlife volunteer groups, environmental groups such as [Landcare](#) and government agencies such as Parks and Wildlife Services and Local Land Services and partner with them to help wildlife.

Be aware of potential risks in offering food and water

The general guiding principle when providing food and water for free-living wildlife is “**FIRST, DO NO HARM**”. If you are not sure, it is better not to offer food, and concentrate only on fresh water. Many foods can result

in serious illness or death. Overfeeding can be fatal. For example, food that is offered to one species in small amounts may be harmful to another.

Dehydration is a major threat for wildlife in drought and bushfire situations. Most animals can survive for days or weeks without food, but dehydration can kill very quickly. **Fresh clean water** is the top priority and is more important than food, especially in early days of a response. Eating when dehydrated can lead to serious gastro-intestinal issues and can be fatal. Aim to allow animals to rehydrate first, then feed. Always provide fresh water with any food offered.

Hygiene and safety for animals are important considerations. Please also consider your own safety and well-being at all times.

Providing food (and to a lesser extent, water) brings **risks** of:

- Consumption of inappropriate foods for the animal, with a risk of serious illness and death
- Increased spread of infectious diseases
- Increased chance of predation
- Drowning or misadventure in unsuitable water containers
- Longer term malnutrition, including simple overfeeding and obesity
- Increase in feral and pest species
- Increase and spread of weeds to new locations
- Increased aggression within and between species
- Increased numbers of “bossy” species, reduction in “timid” species and disadvantages for threatened species
- Long-term dependence on human-provided food and water sources.

How and what to offer

- **Fresh clean water is best.** Clean, thoroughly dry, and refill water containers daily with fresh water, or use a [refilling water station](#), to prevent the spread of disease.
- If you can bring containers back to your home, then you can clean and disinfect them between uses in a dishwasher or (for plastics) by soaking in a solution of one cup of domestic strength bleach added to four litres of water, then rinse thoroughly.
- See **National Wildlife Biosecurity Guidelines** for more information on hygiene practices www.wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/Portals/0/Documents/ProgramProjects/National_Wildlife_Biosecurity_Guidelines.PDF
- Always wash your hands before and after cleaning and drying food and water containers.
- **Do not add** electrolytes, “rehydration solutions” or sugar to water.
- Water containers should be shallow, robust and stable. Add a rock or stick or other material to give safe access for smaller animals.
- Place water and feed away from public roads (at least 50 m), and in several small stations of low volume. A distance of 500 m between water stations is recommended.
- Provide water at both ground level (suitable for most mammals, birds and reptiles) and elevated in trees for animals which are reluctant to visit the ground (e.g. possums, gliders, some birds).
- Where possible, select shaded areas or clearings with a small amount of clear area around the station, to encourage timid species and reduce predator risk.
- If offering food, regularly move locations to reduce disease and predator risk.
- If offering food, always try to feed as close to the natural diet as possible (see key government weblinks below for further guidance).

- **NEVER feed: Raw meat, cooked bones, bread, baked goods, avocado, rice, banana, onion, garlic chocolate, sugar, honey, molasses, brassicas, dairy products or processed foods with artificial sweeteners.**
- **Do not** feed wildlife mixtures of peanut butter, honey and rolled oats (known as bait or wildlife balls) as they are harmful to some animals.
- **Do not to feed hay** (or seeded grasses) **in natural areas**, including national parks, state forest and private bushland. **Locally-sourced grass or oaten hay** (never lucerne) can be offered, with care, by the **landholder** or with their permission, in **cleared farm areas**. The risk of weed establishment in these areas is considered to be lower.
- **Do not** place bird seed directly onto the ground, always place it in an accessible container.
- Only offer water and food if you are able to check, clean and replenish on a regular basis, preferably **daily**.
- It is very important to **remove uneaten food** as well as to thoroughly clean and dry the food container daily to prevent the spread of disease and attracting unwanted pests. Don't throw uneaten food on the ground.
- Avoid providing food where feral animal populations may benefit, particularly pigs, goats and deer. These species can aggressively dominate food stations and threaten the recovery of native species. Feral Scan (www.feralscan.org.au) provides information on regional distribution of these species.
- Keep **written records** of what is offered, where and when, and animal species and numbers present
- **Phase out** water and food stations as conditions improve, to minimise habituation and dependence on supplementary feeding. It is always best for animals to forage for their own food as soon as possible (see Introduction).
- In the longer term, make your property and garden wildlife-friendly by growing native food plants, creating suitable habitat and limiting use of chemicals and pesticides.

Useful weblinks

Commonwealth government: "Helping flying-foxes in emergencies"

www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/animals-and-plants/native-animals/helping-wildlife-in-emergencies/helping-flying-foxes-in-emergencies

NSW government: "Helping injured wildlife" with details on suitable food for native species and when and how to reduce support after disasters www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/animals-and-plants/native-animals/helping-wildlife-in-emergencies

NSW government: "Helping koalas in emergencies" <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/research-and-publications/publications-search/helping-koalas-in-emergencies>

Tasmania government: "Wildlife and bushfires" <https://dpiwwe.tas.gov.au/wildlife-management/caring-for-wildlife/wildlife-and-bushfires>

Victorian government: <https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/> - See "Feeding Wildlife"

Queensland government: <https://environment.des.qld.gov.au/wildlife/animals/living-with/feeding-wildlife>

South Australia government: "Helping South Australian wildlife affected by bushfires" https://www.environment.sa.gov.au/topics/plants-and-animals/Living_with_wildlife/Feeding_wildlife/helping-bushfire-affected-wildlife

Western Australia government: "Bushfires and wildlife advice" <https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/wildcare-helpline?showall=&start=2>

RSPCA Knowledgebase "Should I be feeding wildlife affected by bushfires?" <https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/should-i-be-feeding-wildlife-affected-by-bushfires/>

Birdlife Australia: <https://birdlife.org.au/media/after-the-fire/>

Taronga Zoo NSW: “Caring for the wildlife in a natural disaster” <https://taronga.org.au/caring-for-the-wild>

WIRES Blog “[Emergency Food, Water and Shelter for Wildlife](#)” and webpage on “[Let nature feed itself](#)”

Wildlife Victoria “[Wildlife Victoria ‘How you can help wildlife in the bushfires’](#)”

Video on “Learn how to [create an arboreal drinker](#)”

See also “**Healthy wildlife, healthy lives**” www.healthywildlife.com.au/documents-to-download/#/ for suitable diets for different species of native wildlife and

“How you can help birds after fires” www.birdsinbackyards.net/content/article/How-you-can-help-birds-after-fires

Find out more about **making your property wildlife friendly:** [living with native animals](#).



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