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## OUTDOORS, ENVIRONMENT, AND WILDLIFE

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# Reasons Not to Feed Deer

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**IN MONTANA, THE WINTERS CAN BE PARTICULARLY LONG** and hard. This can take a toll on wildlife populations, especially deer (*Odocoileus spp.*). Deer do starve to death in winter and this can lead well-meaning people to consider providing food to ‘help’ deer survive particularly tough stretches of winter. However, it is important to resist the urge to feed deer during these difficult times.

### It’s illegal

First and foremost, it is illegal to provide supplement feed to deer in Montana (see state statute: [leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title\\_0870/chapter\\_0060/part\\_0020/section\\_0160/0870-0060-0020-0160.html](http://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0870/chapter_0060/part_0020/section_0160/0870-0060-0020-0160.html)). Second, feeding deer can alter behavior and create a variety of unintended consequences, including fatalities. Supplemental food sources can render deer dependent upon artificial food sources (**Figure 1**), attract other wildlife, result in deer-caused damage on neighboring properties, increase likelihood of deer/vehicle collisions, and cause a rise in deer populations that opens up another suite of potential issues (overbrowsing, disease transmission, etc.).

### More harm than good

All that said, another reason not to feed deer is that it could actually do more harm than good, especially during the late, harsh winter months. When wildlife experience starvation, the natural answer does seem like feeding the animal will help. However, the idea that feeding deer during a hard winter can help is a fallacy. In reality, it is one of the worst things we can do for deer in a tough winter. Introducing a new food to deer, particularly a high-energy food such as corn or high-protein food such as alfalfa hay while their

bodies are struggling during winter may shock their system, and could even be deadly.

Deer digestion involves protozoa and bacteria that help break down food. Different microorganisms help digest different types of vegetation. If a deer has been feeding on aspen or willows, it has built up the microorganisms that digest only this kind of vegetation. If this same deer suddenly fills its stomach with corn or hay, it may not have enough of the corn- and hay-digesting microorganisms in its stomach to digest the food. This means a deer can starve to death with a full stomach (**Figure 2**).

In addition, deer can become fixated on a food source. Deer will stay near a sure food source, even an inadequate one, rather than seek more sufficient food in other areas. Once



**Figure 1.** Illustration of some of the unintended consequences (e.g., abnormal concentration of deer and/or dependency on an artificial food source) that can occur from providing deer with a supplemental food source. Photo: Buck Manager – White-tailed Deer Management & Hunting

**Figure 2.** Deer discovered near South Hampton, N.H. in 2015 that were suspected to have died from enterotoxemia; a condition caused by a rapid change in diet often associated with winter feeding. Photo: New Hampshire Fish and Game

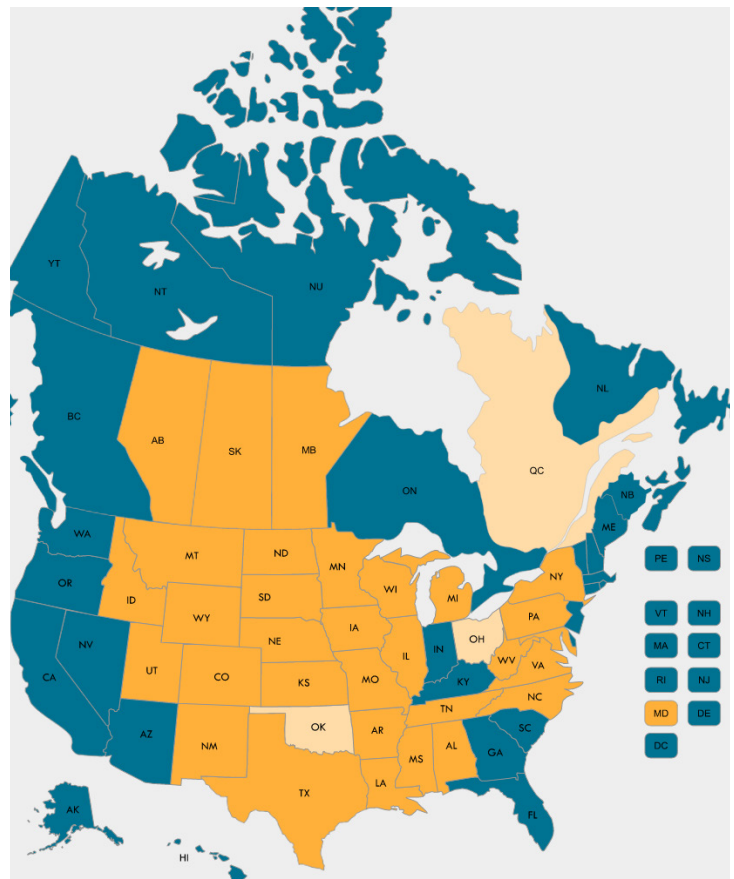


food is discovered, deer concentrate around a feeder rather than scattering through the available winter range. Often, they remain in an artificial feeding area getting only half the food they need rather than fighting the snow to use natural browse. They quickly deplete any close-by forage and can stay in a feeder area until they starve to death. This is why spring searches often reveal concentrations of dead deer within the immediate vicinity of feed areas.

Even in states where providing supplement feed is legal (which again, is not the case in Montana), if someone decides to feed deer, they must provide that feed every day. Any interruption, whether due to depleted funds, personal illness, a vacation, a snowstorm or a midwinter move to a warmer climate, will eliminate part or all of a deer's diet and the deer that depend on the food will suffer. Once a feeding program starts, it must continue until spring when delicate new growth lures deer to resume foraging away from the feeder.

Another concern with providing supplemental feed is the fact that limited food resources during a time of extreme stress will make deer abnormally competitive. Translation, deer won't "divvy up" feed equally even if food is provided in abundance.

Competition between deer in natural situations is usually limited because natural food sources are scattered. In artificial feeding situations, deer often become combative, striking one another with hooves



**Figure 3.** Map illustrating current distribution of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). States and Provinces in orange and tan have known cases of CWD as of 2021. Image: [cwd-info.org/](http://cwd-info.org/)



**Figure 4.** Deer shows classic clinical signs of chronic wasting disease: emaciation, wide stance, lowered head, and droopy ears. Photo: Wyoming Game and Fish

to assure themselves a share of the food. The ones that need the food most (i.e., young, old, sick, in poorest health), are kept away by larger or stronger deer.

Artificial feeding also can spread disease. When deer are abnormally close to one another (**Figure 1**), contagious diseases or parasites are more easily spread. This is a major concern with diseases, especially Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), which is an inevitably 100% fatal, transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) of North American deer, elk, and moose. CWD is a disease of increasing concern and poses significant challenges for wildlife managers attempting to control or eradicate the disease (**Figure 3**). Like other prion diseases, with CWD, classic clinical signs of the disease may be slow to develop. Some individuals may not show any signs of the disease for years after they become infected. However, as CWD progresses, infected animals may have a variety of changes in behavior and appearance, which may include: weight loss, stumbling, wide stance, lack of coordination, listlessness, excessive drooling, drooping ears, and/or lack of fear of people. To learn more about CWD, visit <https://cwd-info.org/>.

If deer are observed that appear to be dying of starvation and/or showing signs consistent with that of CWD (**Figure 4**), report it immediately to the local FWP office.

### **Tough love, not food**

The bottom line is that artificially feeding deer in winter can alter deer behavior and have detrimental, and sometimes fatal, effects. What deer need over the winter months is “tough love,” not food. The best way to help wildlife make it through the winter is to step back and allow the animals’ instincts to take over. To help wildlife near the home, focus on improving the wildlife habitat on or near the property by including natural food and cover (e.g., some conifer cover and regenerating forest or brushy habitat). It is also important that wildlife populations are in balance with what the habitat can support. It’s the only way to minimize starvation and work for both deer health and humane treatment.

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