

Life & Times of the

# Whitetail



## Did someone say *FREE* food?

**I**F YOU WANT to draw a crowd, offer free food. This works at church gatherings, open houses and booster meetings. It also works in backyards. In the case of deer, it can be harmful or, in fact, deadly. Decades of research show that supplemental feeding leads to increased disease risk, long-term habitat destruction, increased vehicle collisions, habituation to humans and alterations in deer behavior.

People often offer food to attract wildlife for viewing. Supplemental feeding congregates deer in unnatural densities. And, just like cramming 200 people on an airplane increases the odds of other passengers catching a case of the sniffles from seat 14B, gathering large numbers of deer in small areas increases the risk of spreading communicable diseases such as chronic wasting disease, tuberculosis and mange.

Deer can get sick merely by eating supplemental food. Rapid exposure to a concentrated grain diet, like corn, can cause a fatal disruption of the animal's rumen. By the time the microorganisms of the rumen adapt to a highly digestible, high energy, low fiber feed, the deer could be dead from a build up of lactic acid.

Deer behaving normally in winter eat less, move less, and rest in places protected from the weather in order to conserve energy and safeguard fat reserves. But, once a deer is a free-food junkie, it behaves unnaturally. Deer traveling to feeding locations leave protected areas and move farther than they otherwise would, only to reach feeding areas that are often open and exposed to harsh weather. Deer can burn more calories in travel and heat loss than they consume in feed. Traversing roads to reach feeding sites endangers motorists as well as deer, and deer using the sites lose their fear of humans, increasing the potential for aggressive behavior towards people.

Our human desire to reduce perceived suffering is noble, but nature has been coaching this game very successfully for millennia. Winter mortality will never be eliminated. While observing it is unpleasant, it is a natural part of living as a WILD animal. Rather than feeding, which contributes to habitat degradation by artificially supporting concentrated numbers of deer, we can help deer by improving habitat and natural food sources that benefit all wildlife. After all, there is no such thing as a free meal. □

