

Wildlife& Flooding FAQ's

As floodwaters rise in wildlife habitat areas, animals may seek shelter in locations where humans live or may become isolated on “islands” where they have no access to food. While it is human nature to want to help these wild animals, the following provides answers to frequently asked questions regarding supplemental feeding, human safety issues, possible human-wildlife conflicts, and precautions around wildlife.

SUPPLEMENTAL WILDLIFE FEEDING

Question: Should I feed wildlife in my backyard or property?

Answer: In most cases no. The best course of action is to leave wildlife alone while they move through your property searching for available habitat on higher ground. Feeding will offer an incentive for deer and other wildlife to remain on your property, rather than moving along.

Question: What if deer are stranded on a levee or man-made structure with no access to food?

Answer: Although this answer may be unsettling to most people, in a majority of situations, it is best to leave deer alone and let nature take its course. Most people have the best intentions, feeding isolated or stranded deer (or other wildlife may do more harm than good). However, approaching these isolated areas may cause deer to jump in the water, putting them at greater risk. Furthermore, feeding these animals will prompt congregation of animals which may promote disease transmission.

Question: If the situation were appropriate, what should we feed stranded deer?

Answer:

- A pelleted full-ration feed of at least 12% crude protein placed in a trough-type feeder is the best feeding option for deer. Cattle or dairy feed is acceptable and is typically cheaper than deer feed. Feed should be kept off of the ground to minimize spoilage and contamination (e.g., excrement from deer and other wildlife). Range pellets or cubes are an option if they are spread across an area to avoid animal concentration.

- Hay – Fescue, Bahia, Bermuda hays (and other hays from grasses) are not recommended for deer because the nutritional content is not adequate for deer (it will cost deer more energy to digest this type of hay than the deer will gain from it). Alfalfa or peanut hay is more suitable for deer, although these types of hay are generally more expensive and less available.
- Corn should NOT be fed due to potential dangers with aflatoxins (which may increase if the corn is on the ground and exposed to moisture). Deer can sustain high levels of aflatoxins, but birds (e.g., wild turkey) are susceptible and more likely to die from aflatoxin poisoning. Also, too much corn (or other grains like oats, wheat, etc.) can be harmful to deer because a diet composed primarily of corn or other grains can lead to rumen acidosis and cause long-term damage and death to the deer.

POTENTIAL FOR ANIMAL DEATH

Question: Will animals die from the flood?

Answer: Yes, some animals will die. Currently, there is no way to estimate the rate of mortality that will occur and it will likely vary from location to location depending on flood conditions. The young and really old animals will be most vulnerable. Remember that most of these animals are adapted to flooding situations, and many will survive. The amount of wildlife mortality will depend on the spatial extent and duration of the flood.

Question: Can we use this opportunity to dispatch feral hogs ON PRIVATE LANDS?

Answer: Yes, this may be a great opportunity ON PRIVATE LANDS ONLY to dispatch feral hogs as they are a highly invasive, nuisance animal. As long as you are on PRIVATE PROPERTY, or you have permission from the landowner, you may harvest feral hogs. Please use caution and make sure of your target! Don't make the mistake of shooting other wildlife (like black bear). For more information regarding the legalities of shooting feral hogs, please visit <http://home.mdwfp.com/wildlife/Species/Nuisance/info.aspx?id=772#hog>

Question: How will the flooding affect bird populations?

Answer: Regarding any ground nesting species, the obvious answer is yes. However, tree nesting species and migrating species in areas currently experiencing high water levels will also be affected.

Songbird species that normally use the Mississippi River as a travel corridor for migrations or as breeding and reproduction habitat during this time of the year will be negatively impacted. The areas of greatest impact will be those currently experiencing the highest water levels (areas where ½ or more of mature or old growth trees are under water). Hopefully, many of these species will be able to utilize habitats associated with smaller river systems and hardwood habitats outside the levee system that have not experienced extensive flooding.

Turkey and bobwhite quail will experience a high rate of nest failure in flooded areas. Some individuals may be able to nest again in suitable habitats outside the levees that are not currently flooded. In those areas currently flooded outside the levees, whether or not they nest again depends on how long it takes for floodwaters to recede and available habitat remaining.

Wood ducks, mergansers, woodpeckers, and other cavity nesting birds will probably experience some nest failure in the high water areas. In Mississippi, wood duck nesting can start as early as in January and continues until it peaks in April or May. How floodwaters affect nesting will depend on nesting dates; egg hatch time is 27 – 30 days and young ducks cannot fly until about 8 weeks after hatch. Depending on availability of local tree cavities and nest boxes not affected by floodwaters, some individual females will be able to “dump” nest (when more than one female lay in the same nest).

Wading bird (wood storks, egrets) rookeries also will be impacted in high water areas.

Question: How will flood waters affect small game populations?

Answer: Squirrel and rabbit populations will experience higher than usual mortality in flooded areas. How severe their populations will be impacted cannot be determined at this time.

- **Squirrels:** During normal river stages, squirrels already experience fairly high death rates. The average lifespan of squirrels in the wild is about 18 months. Squirrels that are able to escape flood waters will run a higher risk of death from predators, vehicles, and starvation. Reproduction will also be negatively impacted. Both gray and fox squirrels have two major breeding periods in Mississippi. They also breed some throughout the year.
 - The winter breeding period results in young born January to March.
 - The summer breeding period results in young born June to August. The summer breeding period is usually more productive.
- **Rabbits:** As is the case with squirrels, under normal river stages rabbit populations already experience high death rates. Average life span is about 15 months for cottontails and about 2 years for swamp rabbits. Reproduction in flooded areas will be negatively impacted.
 - **Cottontails** typically breed from January through September. The pregnancy period is about 28 days for cottontails. Average litter size is

four to five for cottontails, and the largest litters are produced during May and June. A single female cottontail can easily have four to five litters per year.

- **Swamp rabbits** usually breed from February to mid-July. Pregnancy lasts about 40 days for swamp rabbits. Average litter size is three to four for swamp rabbits, and female swamp rabbits usually have only two to three litters per year.

HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICTS

Question: Why are deer crowding in residential areas and on people's property?

Answer: Flood waters have destroyed much of the vegetation that deer need for food and cover. High waters also push deer out of the low-lying bottomlands into upland, sometimes residential areas. Although deer and other animals would not prefer to inhabit locations with high human populations, they are merely attempting to seek refuge. Unfortunately, high concentrations of deer in residential areas greatly increase the potential for human-wildlife contact and may lead to deer in backyards, gardens, and roads. Please use caution when driving if large groups of deer have been reported or seen. Deer vehicle collisions can cause extensive damage to cars, and injury to humans.

Question: What if a wild animal is near or in my residence?

Answer: Although unlikely, a large wildlife species such as a deer may run inside a house or building. This situation can be dangerous as the animal is under duress and may be combative. To avoid injury, put as much space as possible between you and the animal, open as many exit points as possible (windows, doors) and wait for the animal to exit on its own. If the animal persists and appears aggressive or injured, the authorities may need to be contacted. In the case of a small animal, a broom or stick may work to escort it from the building. Do not directly approach, or attempt to restrain and handle large wild animals that enter buildings.

Question: Are there any potentially dangerous animals to watch out for? What should be done to avoid any contact with these animals?

Answer: In natural disaster situations such as flooding where all ecosystems are disrupted, there is an increased likelihood of potentially dangerous animals to come in contact with humans:

- **Alligators** could appear in roadways or yards. Most alligators are normally non-aggressive unless provoked. As a precaution, stay very far away from the animal and keep pets on leashes. If human life is in danger, contact the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, & Parks at 601-432-2199 (Mon – Fri, 8am-5pm) or 1-800-BE SMART after normal business hours. **To report an alligator encounter contact:** Ricky Flynt, Alligator Program Coordinator, MDWFP 601-432-2217
- **Snakes** seek temporary refuge in homes and buildings during natural disasters. Cottonmouths would be the most probable venomous snake you might encounter. Be watchful while moving through high waters or clearing debris. Check attics, cupboards, outbuildings, and ventilation for snake presence. Wear long pants, boots, and gloves when walking through standing water.
How to identify a snake: <http://msucares.com/pubs/infosheets/is0641.pdf>
Tips for using precautions around snakes: <http://msucares.com/pubs/infosheets/is1354.htm>
Snake distribution in Mississippi: <http://msucares.com/pubs/publications/p2277.pdf>
- **Bear** encounters will rarely occur but if a bear wanders into a residential area, keep all people and pets at a safe distance. The Louisiana Black Bear is a federally protected animal and the American Black Bear is protected in Mississippi. If human safety is at risk contact the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, & Parks at 601-432-2199 (Mon – Fri, 8am-5pm) or 1-800-BE SMART after normal business hours. **To report a bear sighting or encounter contact:** Brad Young, Black Bear Program Coordinator, MDWFP 601-432-2242
- **Fire Ants** are flushed from their nests in large surges of water or flood situations. Once flushed, they form a raft by attaching to one another and are able to float on top of water. These large concentrations of ants can be aggressive and cause serious bites.
- **Mosquito** numbers are likely to explode with flood waters left behind in all types of containers such as old tires, boats, and even swimming pools. Mosquitoes can spread diseases such as encephalitis and West Nile Fever.

HABITAT ISSUES

Question: Are there any habitat damage concerns associated with animals displaced by floodwaters?

Answer: Due to flooding, there is less available habitat for animals to seek refuge. Less available habitat results in fewer available resources and greater competition (between and among species) as these areas exceed carrying capacity. Some potential concerns for wildlife:

- Greater chances of disease transmission and internal parasite infections in wildlife (between and among species).

- Animals being pushed further away from the river and from overcrowded habitats may result in greater amounts of wildlife damage to croplands not affected by floodwaters.

Question: How will flood waters affect hardwood timber species and oak mast (acorn) production?

Answer: Most of the hardwood tree die-offs that occurred during the 1993 floods were a combination of excessive water for extended periods of time and large sediment deposits. In most cases these mass die-offs were in green tree reservoirs that were flooded (intentionally) in early November, and because of natural events had to remain flooded until August.

- **Hardwood seedlings** completely under water for a few days or longer will probably die.
- The negative impacts on **mature hardwood trees and saplings** will vary across the area. If water levels in flooded areas remain high for more than 2 to 3 weeks and oxygen levels begin to drop, the trees will begin to show signs of stress. High water conditions for extended periods of time during late spring and summer usually cause large die-offs to all species of trees except for those such as cypress and water tupelo that are better adapted to such conditions. High levels of sedimentation are harmful to all species except for those that have preformed root initials in the bark such as cottonwood and willow.
- **Hard and soft mast** production will be negatively impacted in some areas. It stands to reason that a stressed tree will probably produce a poor mast crop due to the environmental condition.

Possible Good News: Based on the upper portions of the Lower Mississippi River Valley at Cairo, Illinois the waters are receding at a rate of one foot per day and without additional heavy rainfall mast crop failure may not reach high levels.

SMALL MAMMAL AND DISEASE ISSUES

Question: Should I be concerned about mice, rats, and other small mammals nesting in my residence or spreading disease?

Answer: Potential exists for small mammal species to invade more homes, barns, grain bins, and other storage facilities.

- There are no high level health risks unless there is a mass infestation of rodents.
- People may need to take more precaution than usual to protect their dry foodstuffs; bread, cereal – most anything not in cans, jars, or that requires refrigeration.
- If removal becomes necessary, do not handle rodents and other small mammal carcasses with bare hands.

WATER QUALITY, FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE ISSUES

Question: What precautions can I take to ensure I do not get sick from flood waters?

Answer: Avoid handling animals without gloves, do not drink or eat anything that has come in contact with flood water and wash hands and/or bathe thoroughly if your skin comes in contact with floodwaters.

Question: Are there any safety issues with eating fish that have been caught in flood waters?

Answer: Higher than usual amounts of sediment and dead plant and animal matter in the water will reduce oxygen levels and this may result in fish kills in some areas. Also, it stands to reason that flood waters will contain some amount of contaminants (chemicals and particles) from runoff. For now, the best advice is to practice extreme caution about eating fish taken from flood waters and wait until the proper authorities have given the "all clear."

Question: Will floodwaters allow for the spread of Asian carp?

Answer: It's a pretty safe bet that any tributary or drainage connected with the Mississippi River already contained Asian carp before the flood. Asian carp need a large flowing water system to reproduce and sustain populations and any carp that invade lakes or ponds are probably not a long-term threat.