



Wild Bird Feeding Industry

"Promoting responsible feeding, creating alliances, removing barriers, safeguarding gains and enhancing the experience of the consumer"

Information on rat attraction to wild bird feed
March 30, 2012

Background: On March 13, 2012, Headquarters received the following email from a WBFI member:

We received a call from a resident of West Allis, WI who is upset because the county is enforcing an ordinance restricting feeding of WB and squirrel products because it supports harborage of rats. They are asking if we have any information/feedback to combat this. It is my understanding it is going to court and he is looking for some helpful information to support this is not a problem.

Headquarters reached out to the scientific and academic network to learn more about this situation. This document is a synopsis of the information Headquarters received.

There appear to be no scientific studies specifically related to this issue. Rather, there are rat behavioral patterns known to wildlife biologists and ornithologists that lead to an understanding of best practices for the hobby of wild bird feeding.

- Bird feeding can become a feeding opportunity for rats that are already in the area for other reasons. The key here is **already in the area**.
- It is unlikely that the act of feeding wild birds will result in rats being attracted to areas in which there were no rats previously. Thus, if you were to feed birds next to a city dumpster that already had rats or to feed birds next to a sewer line (both of which are highly unlikely scenarios), you would be likely to attract rats to your bird feeders. However, if your neighborhood does not currently have rats you are unlikely to attract rats by feeding birds. As an analogy, if a person were to put a tray of Pacific salmon in his front yard, he would not attract Bald Eagles to his yard even though they eat salmon. This is because Bald Eagles don't live in his suburban neighborhood; it is not their habitat.
- Seeds alone (and any dry material for that matter) **cannot attract rats**. Rats will be present if there is a prime food source around the neighborhood. Rats are more likely to be attracted by the odors from pet waste, outdoor pet food bowls, inadequate waste and garbage containers, compost bins, BBQ grills, vegetable garden waste, un-harvested fruits and nuts from trees, human-made habitat opportunities such as firewood stacks or brush piles, and standing sources of water. These will attract far more the rats than an excess of seeds on the ground. The trash-collection practices of any neighborhood are WAY more important than a bird-feeder ban.
- However, in the event someone is feeding birds in a neighborhood that already has rats, it is important to limit the quantities of seeds you provide for the birds and try to get a large seed tray to decrease the spilling.
- The likelihood of attracting rats to bird feeders can be substantially lowered by following practices such as:
 - Clean up seed spilled on the ground under the feeder on a frequent basis
 - Use a catch tray below the feeder to catch spilled seed before it hits the ground

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Association Alliances: Bird Education Network (BEN) • Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology • National Fish and Wildlife Foundation



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- Don't place bird food on or very close to the ground (thereby making it easier for rats to access the food supply); instead, ensure bird feeders are 4-5 feet above ground
- Bring feeders inside at night, when rats are most active
- Store extra supplies of bird seed in a rodent-proof container (WBFI recommends this anyway)
- Use bird seed that birds actually like and which leaves little (if any) residue behind (e.g., sunflower chips); any seed which goes uneaten contributes to the potential food supply for any rats present in your community
- Reduce / remove undesirable and unnecessary sources of standing/stagnant water in your immediate area (also helps with mosquito control)

Unfortunately, this topic is being brought up across the country with increasing frequency over the past few years. Municipal legislation actually mushroomed significantly across the USA since 2010.

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