

Bird feeding in urban New Zealand: can we use it for conservation gains?

Dr Josie Galbraith¹, Assoc. Prof. Jacqueline Beggs¹, Assoc. Prof. Darryl Jones², Dr Margaret Stanley¹
¹University Of Auckland, ²Griffith University

Millions of people worldwide engage in the practice of bird feeding. Why? What makes it such a popular activity? More importantly, what is it doing to bird communities? Scientific interest in the effects of bird feeding is a very recent development compared to the history of the practice. There is ongoing debate in many parts of the world as to whether we should or shouldn't feed birds, but little evidence – experimental or otherwise – exists to inform this discussion. There are many purported impacts of feeding – some viewed as positive, some negative. These include supporting populations of threatened species, improving winter survival, dependence, increased aggression, and disease outbreaks. We carried out a nationwide survey of feeding practices, followed by an 18-month feeding experiment in urban Auckland, to quantify the current feeding practices in New Zealand and examine the potential impacts of typical feeding practices. The findings of this research confirm that bird feeding is a popular activity in New Zealand, one that generates positive feelings for those participating. However, it also confirms that the practice has detrimental impacts on urban bird communities here. We discuss these impacts and whether bird feeding can be harnessed as a tool for generating awareness and a conservation ethic in urban New Zealand.