



## A relaxing day at the lake?

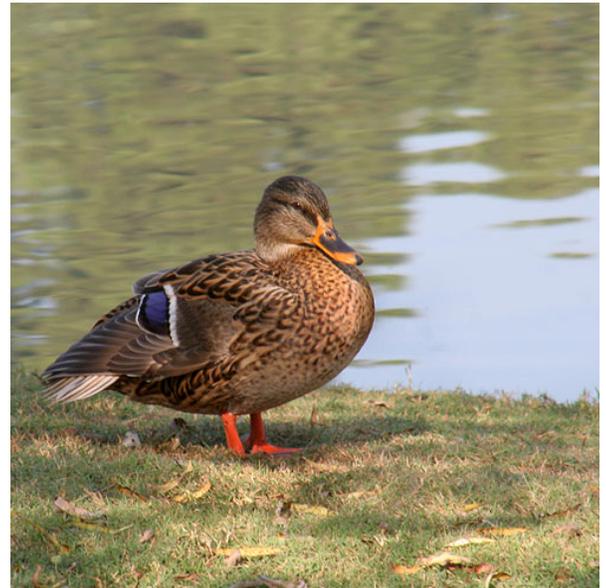
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The afternoon at the lake started innocent enough...

“Mom, look!” exclaimed my almost three-year-old daughter as we waded in the shallow lake water, “A little duck—it’s soooooo cute!”

We were visiting her grandparents and were all enjoying a relaxing day of the lake. The refreshing coolness of the lake during the hot and humid mid-August afternoon was most welcomed. And, being an aquatic biologist, I was pleased that my daughter was expressing an interest in the natural world.

“Yes, it is cute,” I agreed. “See how the color of its body is brown and white? See the dark blue patch on its wings? That means it is a girl mallard duck.” I am constantly looking for opportunities to teach my daughter about the plants and animals that live in and around the lake.



Mallard Duck

Photo source: [www.birdinginformation.com](http://www.birdinginformation.com)

“I think the duck likes me,” she squealed in delight. “Look, it’s swimming toward me—can I pet it?”

The duck was indeed swimming towards us and it was getting close, in fact, too close, much too close. I was no longer smiling. “No, petting the duck is not a good idea—it might bite you,” I cautioned. “Ducks aren’t pets.”

The duck continued swimming towards us, getting close enough that we could have reached out and touched it. “Let’s get out of the water for a minute,” I suggested as I grabbed my daughter’s hand and led her out of the water onto the beach.

“Uh, Mom,” said my daughter in a quivering voice, “I think the duck is following us.”

There was no question—the duck was following us. It started to quack and smack its bill, and then it charged at us! I no longer thought it was cute and was no longer having a relaxing afternoon. It was clear that the duck was begging for a snack and that this wasn’t the first time she had tried this trick. I wondered how many

people before us had offered up perhaps a few pieces of soft, white bread, or whatever else they were snacking on while enjoying their day at the lake.

During the next few minutes the situation deteriorated. Gramps and I began politely urging the duck to leave, but it refused to give up. We then ran at the duck making crazy noises—it would temporarily retreat, only to return when we finished making a spectacle of ourselves. I'm assuming the neighbors thought we were crazy and I was pretty sure we weren't setting a good example of acceptable behavior for my daughter. We finally decided that the best (and most respectable) course of action was to sit on our lawn chairs (which were positioned approximately twenty feet from the shoreline) and simply ignore the duck.

But I wasn't able to relax—I kept one eye on the duck and was ready to charge if it dared to get too close again. I have to admit, I was impressed by its perseverance. It swam back and forth along the shoreline for the next half an hour staring at us the entire time. Finally, it glared at us one last time, turned its back to us, fluffed its short white tail, and then swam off.

My daughter finally asked, "Mom, why didn't we just feed the duck?"

While I was relieved that the duck left and that we would be able to enjoy wading in the water again, I was thrilled to be provided with another teaching moment. "Well, there are lots of reasons why it isn't a good idea to feed the ducks or their geese friends." For the next few minutes, I proceeded to explain these reasons in a way that I hoped an almost three-year-old could understand and not be bored to tears by.

**I hope the following adult-version of the explanation doesn't bore you to tears...**

**Feeding bread to ducks and geese is like feeding children candy before dinner.** Ducks and geese seem to like bread and will beg for it much like my daughter asks for candy. Bread has no nutritional value for waterfowl—it just fills up their stomachs, leaving little room for them to eat the natural foods they need to remain healthy. Without maintaining a natural diet, waterfowl will be more susceptible to diseases which could lead to their death.

**Feeding the waterfowl can cause swimmer's itch.** Swimmers' itch is a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to contact with certain parasites of birds and mammals found in the water. Here's how it happens...The adult parasite lives in the bloodstream of infected host animals such as ducks, geese, gulls, and swans. The parasites produce eggs that are passed in the feces of the host bird or mammal. When the animal feces land in the water, snails become infected with these parasites and then the snails release the swimmers itch organism into the water—people swimming nearby can become infected. Symptoms include tingling, burning, or itching of the skin within minutes or days after exposure. Small reddish pimples, appearing within 12 hours, may develop into small blisters. Itching may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away. The more a duck eats, the more feces it will excrete resulting in a higher potential for the swimmer's itch organism to be present in the water and a higher potential for humans to contract the painful and annoying rash.

**Feeding the waterfowl can make swimmers sick.** When waterfowl defecate near shore or in the water they create a health risk to humans. Not only could their fecal matter contain the swimmers itch organism, their fecal

matter naturally contains large amounts of fecal bacteria, commonly known as *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*). If a person swimming in water that contains large amounts of *E. coli* accidentally ingests the water, he/she may experience gastrointestinal problems such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Therefore, the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services recommends that everyone should avoid contact and ingestion of water in areas frequented by waterfowl. Thus, the more food a duck or goose is fed, the higher the probability of elevated bacteria in the lake which is not good for the health of people who swim in the lake.

**Feeding the waterfowl pollutes the lake.** Not only could the fecal matter excreted into the water by ducks and geese possibly contain the swimmers itch organism, it definitely contains *E.coli* bacteria, and it certainly contains the nutrient phosphorus. While nutrients are generally thought of as good things, too much of a good thing, including phosphorus, can cause problems. When present in excessive quantities in a lake, phosphorus can cause unsightly and foul-smelling algae blooms and possibly even toxic cyanobacteria blooms to occur. Simply put, feeding ducks and geese bread, or anything else, can increase the amount of phosphorus in a lake which can degrade the health of the lake and the people and animals using the lake. In addition, offering human food to ducks attracts more than just ducks—leftover and rotting bread, for example, can attract rats, pests, and other predators that can kill ducks and endanger humans. Rotting food also pollutes the water and can cause deadly diseases and parasites to breed.

**A few days later after our afternoon at the lake, I asked my daughter if we should feed the ducks the next time we visit Grandmom and Gramps.** She emphatically stated, “No, Mom. That’s not a good idea!” I smiled. I think I had convinced my daughter—I hope that I have convinced you, too.

**Please, for the sake of the lake, the ducks, and for those of us who try to enjoy the lake, please don’t feed the ducks!**

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