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Junk food won't fly

Group rescues 35 Marshall Park ducks fed steady diet of chips, popcorn and bread

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Slideshow



Marshall Park's malnourished ducks couldn't fly when rescue workers found them. Some were smaller than normal, had stunted feathers and disproportionately large beaks and feet.

The same junk food blamed for making America fat is even worse for ducks.

After years of being fed Cheetos, french fries and Pringles by park visitors, 35 ducks at uptown's Marshall Park have become so malnourished they had to be saved by Carolina Waterfowl Rescue.

"All of the ducks we caught weren't able to fly," said Jennifer Gordon, founder of the volunteer

group based in Charlotte. "Most of them have under-developed feathers and disproportionately large feet and beaks, which are major signs of under-nourishment."

The discovery was made during routine draining and cleaning of the concrete pond last week. Rescue volunteers intended to collect only ducklings, but in the process, were shocked to find widespread illness. Adult ducks were smaller than usual and some were even missing vital feathers.

Because they couldn't fly, the ducks were limited to what's available at the park, mostly scraps of junk food.

Ducks normally eat aquatic vegetation and insects from murky pond water, but neither thrive in concrete ponds. The small amount of aquatic vegetation that manages to grow on the concrete is often washed away during occasional high-pressure fire-hose scrub-downs. As if that's not enough, the pond is then refilled with a mixture of fresh tap water and a blue-green dye that further prevents the growth of vegetation and insect habitation.

Despite an ordinance that prohibits people from feeding waterfowl in county parks, visitors can't say no to hungry, quacking ducks.

"A lot of people think they're doing the right thing when they feed the ducks bread and popcorn, but there are no nutrients in those foods," said Deanna Epps, rehabilitation assistant at Carolina Waterfowl Rescue. "On top of that, there are additives in these foods that their bodies cannot cope with."

After a few weeks of care, Gordon said the malnourished ducks should be recovered and will be released elsewhere. She said a few healthy ducks will remain at Marshall Park.
Mark Price contributed.



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