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Drop the idea: Feeding pigeons in Delhi may spell trouble

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Blue rock pigeons are fed at multiple spots across the city, including traffic islands. Despite reports of many unusual bird deaths in the city and safety warnings, the feeding continues unabated.

Senior municipal public health officials have warned that with multiple bird flu cases in the capital, people should try to stay away from pigeon swarms and these feeding spots. “Pigeons have already been known to cause breathing and skin disorders. Under the current situation when avian flu has caused many bird deaths, people should avoid coming in close proximity with these birds or their excreta. The large sizes of swarms increase the risk of infection being passed,” an official advised.

While New Delhi Municipal Council has decided to remove the vendors selling bird feed at busy intersections, the municipal corporations have still not taken any decision. The mayor of North Delhi Municipal Corporation, Jai Prakash, said it was a good idea to regulate these feeding points and the civic body was also considering taking action in coming days. The east and south corporations, too, confirmed that no final decision had been taken. “Delhi Municipal Corporation Act empowers us to act in case the animal population starts to cause a public health crisis. With no check on them by other predatory birds like kites, the populations of these pigeons are assuming the category of urban bird pests. If a public health emergency situation develops, we can take action under DMC Act,” an official said. Ornithologists say pigeon droppings and feathers — especially accumulating in an area — can increase the chances of respiratory disorders like histoplasmosis, candidiasis and salmonellosis. If the droppings somehow land in the water or food consumed by human beings, e-coli can cause nausea, fever and cramps. The birds are also carriers of ectoparasites, including bed bugs and yellow mealworms. Birders say constant feeding by people at these traffic islands creates food security that helps pigeons breed. They can breed five-six times a year. The dominance of pigeons has also pushed birds like sparrows and mynahs away from the urban setting.

The bird excreta generated by the pigeons is also a cause of multiple diseases. Each pigeon is estimated to create 11.5 kilograms of excreta every year. Being acidic in nature, it also causes

damage to buildings and monuments through acidic saltpetre, besides spreading salmonella germs. Managing the pigeon population is now the responsibility of the veterinary department.

“Pigeons are covered under Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and managing such wild animals and their habitat is mandated by forest departments, not local bodies,” said a senior official.

A public health official said, “Several decades ago, control of animal causing diseases used to come under the public health department. Later, it was shifted to the veterinary department.”