



# Wildlife *factsheet*

*from the wildlife department*

## Balloon releases

**The RSPCA is concerned about balloon releases because of the potential threat they pose to wildlife, farm animals and their environment.**

*Thousands of balloons released into the sky can make an impressive sight but what goes up must come down. The impact of balloons on animals and the environment can be grave – even fatal.*



## Threat to wildlife and other animals

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What goes up must come down and even if the balloons are degradable, they may take a number of weeks to ‘degrade’ whereas it could take only seconds for an animal to swallow a balloon or balloon fragment.

Deflated balloons or balloon fragments may look attractive as food to birds, fish or mammals. Any fragments left on the ground can also easily be eaten by animals grazing on vegetation. Death as a result of ingesting balloons can be caused by the blockage of the digestive and/or respiratory tracts, and is likely to be slow. This has been witnessed in the case of marine turtles, dolphins, whales and farm animals.

Many marine species have been found with balloons in their stomachs after probably mistaking balloons and plastic bags for jellyfish, their favourite food. Reports from the field in the US and Canada have confirmed that balloons have been ingested by sea turtles, for example, a researcher from the University of Texas Marine Science Institute studied sea turtles that had been found stranded; with five per cent of the turtles having pieces of balloons in their digestive system.

Following the findings of a conference in Canada in 1989 on plastic and other debris found at sea, public concern led to the cancellation of mass releases in many cities and several states in the US and Canada. Animals continue to ingest balloon fragments, for example, the *UK & Eire Marine and Turtle Strandings & Sightings Annual Report 2002* includes a report on the post-mortem of a Green turtle found in UK waters with a large fragment of a blue balloon in its stomach and plastic in its oesophagus. Cause of death was given as oesophageal and stomach impaction.

The Marine Conservation Society/Reader’s Digest annual *Beachwatch* survey in 2004 collected more than a thousand balloons found on UK beaches, averaging more than seven balloons per kilometre of beach surveyed.

## Threat to the environment

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Balloon releases cause litter which can harm wild, farm and domestic animals. An estimated 90-95 per cent of balloons rise to an altitude of three kilometres and burst into small fragments. Others may float many miles before descending to the ground or sea semi-inflated. The largest-ever balloon release was 1.4 million balloons in the US – of those, it has been reported that 140,000 could have fallen to the land.

Research states that latex balloons degrade faster than oak leaves and this is often used in defence of mass balloon releases. This is no recommendation however as an oak leaf can take six months or longer to break down. Most of the balloons used in releases are made of degradable latex but some have foil linings that take even longer to degrade.

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Even small-scale releases and balloon races may have a serious effect on the environment and animals – the balloons are often not adequately inflated and the attached strings or ribbons may entangle animals. Weighted race tags can also increase the likelihood of balloons landing in the countryside or at sea.

Balloons have been identified as potential polluters of the marine environment. The Canadian Government refrained from releasing balloons in celebration of Canada Day. Anti-balloon release sentiment has since spread throughout North America with restrictions or a ban on the release of balloons in many US States, such as Virginia and Florida.

## **Balloon releases**

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The RSPCA feels that it would be lamentable if money were to be raised for one good cause only to find that it was responsible for the blight of another. Both the marine and terrestrial environment are already heavily polluted and balloon releases can only exacerbate the situation.

As already stated, regardless of claims of balloons being biodegradable, this is not an instant process, and they may take a number of weeks or months to ‘degrade’ whereas it takes only seconds for an animal to swallow a balloon or balloon fragment.

The RSPCA urges people planning balloon releases to reconsider the following points.

What goes up must come down – all balloons released will fall back to earth either semi-deflated or in fragments constituting a potential hazard to both animals and their environment, be it marine or terrestrial. It is estimated that five per cent of any balloons released will return intact.

- While the known instances of ingestion are relatively few, compared to other known causes of animal mortality, it is likely that these are representative of a greater problem.
- Because we don’t know the true extent of the threat posed by such activities a precautionary approach should be adopted, i.e. don’t do it.

## **Alternatives**

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Use the same balloons intended for release to build one or more balloon statues. Then sell balloon numbers and choose the winning ticket – possibly like a lottery. This approach has merit in that the statues will provide pleasure for a greater length of time and the balloons can then be disposed of in closed litter-bins following the event rather than being released into the environment. People will commend the ‘greenness’ of this approach and positive promotion of this could be advantageous to the organisers when raising money and any balloon manufacturers that advocate such an initiative.

Use latex rather than mylar or foil balloons. Do not attach string, tags or other labels to the balloons.

## **Expressing concern**

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If you find a balloon displaying a company or organisation name, send it back to them with a copy of this factsheet urging them to think of an alternative way of celebrating their next event.

Write to event organisers to explain the likely consequences and ask them to reconsider.

To express concern about the environmental impacts of balloon releases, write to the National Association of Balloon Artists and Suppliers (NABAS), Katepwa House, Ashfield Park Avenue, Ross-On-Wye HR9 5AX, Tel: 01989 762204.

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