

Disturbing Photo Shows a Black Skimmer Feeding a Cigarette Butt to Its Chick

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Black Skimmer feeding its chick a cigarette butt. Photo: Karen Mason

At least twice a week during the summer, [Florida Audubon](#) volunteer Karen Mason visits St. Pete Beach to deter beach-goers from entering fragile nesting sites. When she's not busy shooing away dogs or educating vacationers about the importance of [sharing the shore](#), Mason enjoys snapping photographs of the Black Skimmers she works to protect.

But last month, while photographing her big-billed subjects, Mason captured an adult Skimmer feeding its chick something that didn't look like a fish—or anything else she recognized. Later, after she got home and blew up the photo to reveal the mysterious object, she couldn't believe what she saw: The chick was holding a cigarette butt.

Mason says she didn't see if the chick ate the butt, but just the sight of the baby bird with a filter in its beak was enough to anger her. "There's no excuse for it," she says. "I don't know if people don't realize how toxic cigarette butts are or that they're not really biodegradable,

but it just really upset me.”

Each year, trillions of cigarette filters end up as litter worldwide. The chemical-laden butts are made of a plastic called cellulose acetate and consistently rank number one in trash removed during environmental cleanups. But those efforts, as important as they are, don't even come close to solving the problem. “That's a drop in the bucket,” says Thomas Novotny, CEO of the Cigarette Pollution Project, a nonprofit made up of various public health and environmental groups.

From roadsides to remote hiking trails, cigarette butts are ubiquitous. In urban areas, where they are mindlessly tossed aside on sidewalks and streets, butts are an especially pervasive problem. And when it rains, they can flow with runoff down storm drains and out into waterways and the open ocean. Eventually many of these butts end up on beaches, where seabirds and shorebirds might mistake them for food, just as they do with plastics.

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Studies have shown cigarette butts to have negative impacts on a variety of animals, but so far there's been little research on whether wild birds eat discarded filters or if they are poisoned by them. The scant evidence that does exist points to a high likelihood on both fronts. Pet birds, for example, have been known to eat butts out of their owners' ashtrays, and the results are dire. Peter Sakas, a veterinarian at Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center in Illinois, once examined an African Gray Parrot that died from organ failure due to chemical poisoning after eating used filters. “I always tell people to keep birds away from cigarette butts,” Sakas says, “because it could happen.”

The likely consumption of cigarette butts isn't just limited to shorebirds. Any generalist species with an indiscriminate diet could wind up with filters for food. What's worse, the addition of flavored tobacco products may attract birds with their fruity smells, says Novotny, who researches the environmental impacts of tobacco as a professor at San Diego State University.

Even when they don't cause death in wildlife, eating cigarette butts can lead to nausea, vomiting, and seizures, Novotny says. Birds might be at a greater risk because their small size and fast metabolism means they absorb nicotine and other chemicals faster, requiring less toxins to cause harm.

Simply being in contact with the butts could also pose issues for birds. House Sparrows and House Finches have learned to adapt to the littered landscape, incorporating filters into their nests to help ward off parasites. But research shows that handling the toxin-concentrated fibers with their beaks likely causes genetic damage, which could lead to cancer in longer-lived birds.

Cigarette butts aren't just a hazard for hungry animals, either: They also can end up in the mouths of toddlers. And while filters reduce the amount of tar in cigarette smoke, research shows they make it easier to take deep drags and draw carcinogenic particles further into the lungs. This gives smokers a false sense of protection, even though the rise of cigarette filters coincides with a rise in an aggressive form of lung cancer called adenocarcinoma.

Because of their status as both a public health and environmental concern, there has been a growing push to outright ban cigarette butts. Most recently, California State Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson introduced a bill to ban single-use filters in the state. In response to the increasing pressure, tobacco companies have started looking into biodegradable filters again and even portable ashtrays. Previous attempts to create eco-friendly filters have sputtered, though, and these solutions still ignore the public health issues.

In the meantime, evidence like Mason's Black Skimmer photograph can convince individuals to take action against cigarette butt pollution. Since her picture went viral, people have dedicated beach cleanups to the chick and told Mason that they would be more mindful of where they put their smoking byproducts. "It's not going to be everybody," Mason says, "but every little bit helps."

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