



STRENGTHENING OUR COMMUNITY'S OVERALL HEALTH THROUGH CONSERVATION MEDICINE

DONAT

NEWSLET



Cassidy Beach Dec 20 4 min read

The Birds are Speaking Up Against Continued Lead Use - Why Aren't We?



Bald Eagles patient 2310 in care at Center for Wildlife.

A few weeks ago you may have seen one of our social posts showing a heartbreaking video of a bald eagle taking its last breaths. Just to recap: the bald eagle, approximately 5 years old, was admitted a week prior and our clinic noticed it struggling to breathe. He was found on the ground, unable to stand and too weak to fly. Our clinic suspected lead poisoning and quickly got to work stabilizing. Our wildlife specialists confirmed high levels of lead due to ingesting a lead shot. Though our team moved swiftly and performed gastric lavage after just hours of being admitted, the toxin had already traveled through the nervous system and impacted vital organs.

Sadly, he could not be saved.

A Look Back on Birds as Health Indicators

Birds have long served as indicators of environmental health, as many species are easily

observed and sit at the top of the food chain, making them highly susceptible to accumulating toxins. Most of us have heard the infamous story of canaries in coal mines alerting workers of dangerous gases. Studies have also found that birds can act as indicators of radioactive contamination. Another compelling example is that of the bald eagle and peregrine falcon, whose population declines helped raise awareness about the dangers of carcinogenic pesticides like DDT. In her groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson documented the devastating impact that the use of DDT had on bird reproductive success and biodiversity, ultimately revealing that we weren't just poisoning wildlife but ourselves too. In 1972, a decade after the book's release, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) banned the harmful toxin. The fight against DDT saved us from the risk of cancer and acknowledged the critical importance of wildlife species' role in nature's health and ours. Now, we are faced with a similar crisis: lead poisoning.



A Peregrine Falcon, a species that saw dramatic declines due to the use of DDT and remains on the Maine state Endangered Species List, is released after rehabilitation at Center for Wildlife.

The History of Lead Usage

Many of us mistakenly believe that lead is a thing of the past, but as the bald eagle's death reminds us, its devastating effects are still seen today. Lead's use dates back to around 6500 BC, when it was first used in jewelry and sculptures. Over time, it appeared in paint, gasoline, toys, cosmetics, food and sporting equipment. Health concerns emerged as lead miners and paint manufacturers suffered symptoms of lead poisoning: fatigue, nausea, headaches, and in extreme cases, death. Although never confirmed, there were signs of lead poisoning much before these documented cases. Even with this knowledge, the concept of subclinical and early forms of lead poisoning were overlooked until later in the 20th century. The 1970s marked a turning point when studies revealed that no level of lead exposure is truly safe for humans. Although stricter regulations have since been implemented on the production of lead-based goods, the problem persists. Vulnerable communities, such as those in Flint, Michigan, continue to grapple with the long-lasting effects of lead contamination in aging water systems, while many others still suffer from health complications caused by lead paint that remains in their homes.

What About Wildlife?

For decades, we've understood the harmful effects of lead exposure on both children and adults, so why carry on using it in the food we hunt or the environments we depend on for survival? It continues to pollute our waterways, forests, and other natural habitats, even though its toxic effects are well understood. When animals ingest lead found lying around these environments (like loons who mistake lead sinkers for pebbles used to aid in digestion), it's absorbed into their bloodstream and moves through body tissues. Many scavenger species like vultures and eagles scavenge on animal carcasses, many that can contain lead shot or lead sinkers. Once ingested, the animal experiences lethargy and appetite loss, leading to the inability to walk or fly. Eventually the animals will go into a coma and die. It's estimated that around 10 - 20 million birds die of lead poisoning each year in the United States. It's important to mention that lead poisoning is not only killing

in great numbers but also in a great variety of species. The birds are calling to us once again, urging us to retire lead ammunition and sinkers in favor of safer, lead-free alternatives.



A Common Loon patient X-Ray showing ingested lead sinkers.

In 1991, regulations were enacted to protect waterfowl and other water-related birds by restricting the use of shotgun ammunition containing lead pellets. Although controversial at the time, it has proven to be a positive accomplishment for stakeholders involved, including waterfowl resources. Additionally, six states have successfully banned lead sinkers, and stringent regulations govern the use of other lead-based hunting and fishing products on certain state and federal lands. Unfortunately, despite numerous attempts over the years, a comprehensive federal ban has yet to be realized, and the use of these harmful products continues. The ongoing use of lead underscores the need for more widespread and consistent efforts to safeguard wildlife from its toxic effects.

The Reality of Human Impact

While we always love to celebrate conservation victories and will continue to do so, we must also acknowledge that wildlife rehabilitation and conservation medicine exist largely due to the destructive impact of human activities on the very ecosystems we depend on. Even the stories without happy endings are crucial; they serve as stark reminders that the choices we make ripple through the environment, with far-reaching consequences.

There are many ways to make a difference beyond avoiding lead-based sporting equipment and advocating for safer alternatives. This season of giving, we encourage you to consider the impact of the gifts you give. Reflect on product ingredients, sourcing, manufacturing practices, and your overall consumption. We also urge you to support local wildlife rehabilitators like us, who depend entirely on fundraising to sustain our vital work. Treating lead poisoning can be expensive and prolonged; we need your support and the resources to help our native wildlife recover. Lastly, if you encounter an animal exhibiting signs of lethargy, paralysis, abnormal behavior, seizures, or blindness, these may be symptoms of lead poisoning. In such cases, please bring the animal to a wildlife clinic immediately.

Thank you for being dedicated wildlife stewards who care about the critters in our backyards!