

Fact Sheet: **Bald Eagles and Lead Poisoning**

Lead toxicity (or poisoning) has been identified as a concern for a number of bird species, including Bald Eagles. Over the past 25 years, from 21% to 25% of sick or injured eagles treated at the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center were found to have toxic levels of lead in their blood. In 2005-2006, 13 of 25 injured or sick eagles found and treated in Iowa exhibited signs of lead poisoning. Because several of these appear to result from ingested lead slug or bullet fragments, questions are being asked about sources of this lead and what might be done to reduce lead toxicity in Bald Eagles.

Because the Iowa Department of Natural Resources takes seriously its role in conserving all of Iowa's wildlife, we support and applaud efforts of hunters in some parts of the nation who are increasingly turning towards greater use of non-toxic ammunition. Because lead bullets and shotgun slugs items appear to be among several probable sources of lead toxicity, we encourage hunters to follow this example and purchase only non-toxic sporting products. Waterfowl hunters have adapted well to using non-toxic pellet loads in the past two decades. Now it's time to consider using similar alternatives for all hunting purposes. While lead poisoning in eagles or other wildlife does not presently appear to be a critical threat to their survival, DNR does not want the problem to grow to a level where restrictive actions must be considered. Lead fragments could be picked up here in Iowa, or migrating eagles might obtain it while passing through other states. Nevertheless, Iowa's sportsmen and women have shown their conservation leadership many times throughout our history. Now they are encouraged to step up again by proactively helping combat lead poisoning in wildlife.

This fact sheet will describe lead poisoning symptoms, some possible lead sources, and how hunters can help reduce lead that may be affecting our treasured national symbol.

Lead poisoning and its symptoms:

- When ingested in large enough quantities, lead has detrimental effects on the nervous and reproductive systems of mammals and birds
- Eagles frequently scavenge carcasses of deer, pheasants and other wildlife that may harbor lead or lead fragments
- Live prey impaired by lead ingestion, such as waterfowl, become easy targets for eagles
- Eagles with lead poisoning may exhibit loss of balance, gasping, tremors and impaired ability to fly
- Emaciation follows and death can occur within 2 to 3 weeks after lead ingestion

How hunters can voluntarily help reduce lead poisoning:

- Select only non-toxic shot for all small game shotgun hunting (lead shot is already prohibited for waterfowl hunting but optional for other small game)
- Select non-toxic slugs or bullets for deer hunting
- If lead ammunition is used, recover and remove all shot game from the field
- Hide gut piles and remains of butchered carcasses by burying or covering with rocks and/or brush
- Remove slugs, bullets or fragments and surrounding flesh from any carcass remains left in the field

Miscellaneous facts:

- Iowa's Bald Eagle population is still growing significantly, with approximately 210 eagle pairs now nesting in Iowa and from 2,500-4,400 eagles overwintering annually
- Because of the increased number of birds, more injured and sick eagles will be encountered by people
- More sick birds encountered does not necessarily indicate that lead poisoning is more common now than in the past
- Most hunters certainly *do* care about the health of Iowa's eagles and other wildlife and will take proactive measures to prevent lead poisoning if they understand the facts

Links to information about lead poisoning and ways of reducing problems:

<http://www.soarraptors.org/EaglesandLead.htm>

<http://www.cvm.umn.edu/raptor/news/healthtopics/leadpoisoning/home.html>

http://www.azgfd.gov/w_c/california_condor_lead.shtml

<http://www.peregrinefund.org/pdfs/ResearchLibrary/Hunt-bullet-ms.pdf>

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/game/water/nontoxicshotfinal.htm>

http://magazine.audubon.org/features0212/endangered_species.html

For more information, contact the Wildlife Diversity Program, Iowa DNR, 1436-255th Street, Boone, IA 50036-7557, ph. 515-432-2823

<http://www.iowadnr.com/wildlife/files/eagles.html>