

# Seeing poisoned eagles, some seek ban on lead ammo TANGLING WITH A TOXIN

By DAVID HENDEE

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

ELMWOOD, Neb. — Getting clipped by a vehicle on Interstate 80 probably saved the young bald eagle's life.

The collision near North Platte in western Nebraska knocked the young male for a loop. The bird was easily caught and rushed 250 miles across the state to a raptor recovery center near Elmwood.

The eagle's only physical injury was a 1½-inch crack in its lower beak, but other signs indicated that the bird had a more serious problem — the early stages of lead poisoning.

A golden eagle found along a road near Merna in central Nebraska the same day the bald eagle was injured died of severe dehydration just hours after arriving in Elmwood for treatment. A bald eagle later found along the Platte River near Fremont in eastern Nebraska with similar symptoms died Dec. 21.



Finch

Both had lead poisoning.

"It's a problem," said Betsy Finch, executive director of Raptor Recovery Nebraska. "More than half of the eagles we get in a year have lead poisoning."

Several environmental groups have sued the federal Environmental Protection Agency, asking a judge to protect America's wildlife from poisoning caused by ingesting lead found in shotgun pellets and shrapnel from rifle bullets and in fishing tackle, such as sinkers and lures.

The EPA is ignoring long-established science on the dangers of

See Eagle: Page 2



DAVID HENDEE/THE WORLD-HERALD

This young male bald eagle is recovering from lead poisoning at Raptor Recovery Nebraska near Elmwood. Handler Janet Stander wears welding gloves to grasp the raptor's talons. The poisoning was discovered after the bird was clipped by a vehicle.

# Eagle: Many hunters prefer lead ammo because it's inexpensive

Continued from Page 1

lead poisoning in the wild, said Jeff Miller, of the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that filed the suit last month.

"There are already safe and available alternatives to lead products for hunting and fishing, and the EPA can phase in a changeover to nontoxic materials," Miller said.

Among the birds affected by lead are bald eagles — once hunted and poisoned to the point of being an endangered species. Use of the now-banned insecticide DDT contributed to the decline.

Bald eagle numbers rebounded enough that they no longer were considered threatened as of 2007, but they remain protected. The return of nesting bald eagles to Nebraska has been remarkable, said Joel Jorgensen, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's eagle authority in Lincoln.

There were none during the century that ended in 1990. Now Nebraska has about 60 nesting eagle pairs. Iowa has about 210 nesting pairs. There are about 12,000 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states, up from 500 during the 1960s.

Nebraska and Iowa hunting seasons provide ample winter scavenging opportunities when thousands of bald eagles congregate in places with open water. From 2,500 to 4,400 eagles overwinter in Iowa, particularly along Mississippi River fishing spots. About 800 to 1,600 spend the winter in Nebraska.

The issue of lead poisoning is a tricky topic for hunting and fishing organizations and state game agencies because many hunters and anglers say they want to minimize their impact on the ecosystem and be responsible stewards of the land and wildlife. Yet many outdoorsmen prefer lead because it's inexpensive and widely available.

Finch supports efforts to ban lead in all hunting ammunition and fishing tackle.

"I didn't used to think that it was that bad, but we're still having problems," she said.

Jorgensen said there is no doubt that the roughly six to 12 eagles treated for lead poisoning in the state each year represent a fraction of the actual number affected, but lead is not a significant source of mortality in eagles.

"That's not to say lead isn't a concern," Jorgensen said. "It's still gut-wrenching to see an emaciated eagle die with lead poisoning."

Federal law banned lead shot for waterfowl hunters in 1991 to address lead poisoning in ducks and the sec-



DAVID HENDEE/THE WORLD-HERALD

**This young bald eagle is recovering from lead poisoning. About half the eagles treated for lead poisoning at Raptor Recovery Nebraska survive.**

ondary poisoning of bald eagles. Non-lead ammunition is optional for hunters of other small game.

Iowa's Department of Natural Resources encourages — but doesn't require — hunters to use only nontoxic ammunition, primarily because officials don't want lead poisoning to threaten the recovery of bald eagles.

Other than banning lead shot for waterfowl hunters, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has no official stance regarding other legal uses of lead ammunition.

No one knows the source of the lead in the eagles treated at the raptor center.

Mike George, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Nebraska field supervisor in Grand Island, said the North Platte and Merna eagles probably were resident Nebraska birds. The golden eagle probably lived in the Sand Hills because the species doesn't migrate. George said the bald eagle probably was too young to have migrated this far south by late November and so it, too, likely nested in Nebraska.

"To find two eagles the same day, and this early in the year, is a concern," George said.

Based on how ill the eagles were when picked up Nov. 30, George suspects the birds ingested lead when scavenging the carcasses of wounded pheasants that eluded hunters and died later. Pheasant season opened Oct. 30, more than four weeks before the ill eagles were found. The firearm deer season opened in mid-November.

Studies in Minnesota and Iowa indicate that big game and upland game are a significant source of lead poisoning in eagles. Fishing tackle also is a source, according to the Iowa study.

George said that as few as three ingested No. 4 lead shotgun pellets can kill an eagle or hawk if they stay in the bird's digestive tract. Within five or six weeks, the bird usually dies.

George said the pace of finding eagles ill with lead poisoning usually picks up in December through February as wintry weather forces the raptors to scavenge deer carcasses that may carry lead shrapnel.

Bob St. Pierre, a spokesman for Pheasants Forever in St. Paul, Minn., said using lead is an individual decision for hunters. Pheasants Forever's focus remains on creating and preserving wildlife habitat, he said.

Teeg Stouffer, executive director of

Nebraska City-based Recycle a national conservation and ship organization, encourages to use nonlead tackle but does oppose a lead ban.

"Lead is not the worst thing that happened to our waters, and I know it's not the best thing," Stouffer said. "Lead is a toxic material, and I don't want it in our kids' toys. I shouldn't be putting it in our water."

Stouffer said lead will be phased out someday. Until then, he encourages anglers to learn about the dangers of lead and switch to nontoxic materials such as steel, tin, bismuth, and recycled glass.

"As individuals, we don't want to be responsible for killing even one eagle," Stouffer said.

Finch and Janet Stander of Omaha, Neb., assistant rehabilitation director, cared for 21 eagles last year among the 450 birds brought to the Elmwood center.

Raptor Recovery Nebraska is a nonprofit organization that provides care for injured and orphaned birds. Since 1976, it has rescued and treated more than 8,000 raptors — raptors, hawks, owls, falcons and other birds from across Nebraska. About 50% have been released back to the wild.

Stander said eagles suffering from lead poisoning exhibit a variety of symptoms. The toxin attacks the brain and nervous system. Their eyes usually turn lime green, and their tail feathers sometimes fall out. They suffer seizures and paralysis.

They eventually lose the ability to hunt. They become lethargic and more susceptible to death by power lines.

That's when some ill eagles are spotted, conservation officer Finch and Raptor Recovery Nebraska staff members step in.

Finch said an eagle's survival depends on how early in its illness a bird is treated and how much lead it carries. About half the eagles treated for lead poisoning at the center survive.

Finch said the recovering eagle — a small male weighing about 10 pounds — is expected to be released. It has a good appetite and its cracked beak is mending.

The process of flushing lead from a bird takes at least a month, Stander said.

Stander said the bald eagle in the wild, would be dead by now if it did evil things to them."

Contact the writer:  
402-444-1127, david.hendee@owh.com