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FEATURED

Lead bullets are harming local eagles

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A bald eagle at the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center that is suffering from lead poisoning. Eagles contract lead poisoning when they eat disposed of deer carcasses that have lead bullet fragments in their bodies.

Courtesy of The Raptor Center



Perry Braam was trekking through snow-covered trails in Minneopa State Park in January when he stumbled across a bald eagle hunched over in the snow.

The eagle didn't fly away as Braam slowly walked up to it. Puzzled by the behavior, Braam thought something must be wrong and wanted to help. He carefully picked the eagle up at an angle that it couldn't bite him and carried it four miles back to his truck.

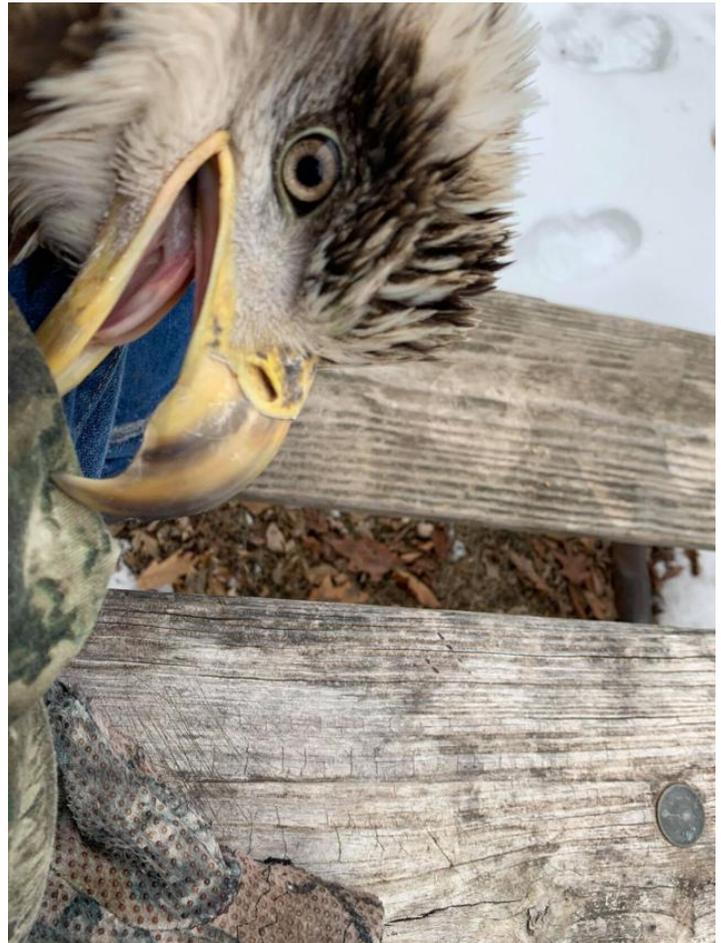
The eagle was one of many suffering from lead toxicity after consuming an animal carcass that had fragments of a bullet in its body.

Braam called the Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota, and a volunteer helped him get the eagle to the center for help. Around 87% of the eagles brought to the center each year have lead in their system, which they most likely ingest when scavenging disposed deer carcasses.

When Braam decided to try to save the eagle, he was nervous he was doing something illegal taking an eagle out of its habitat.

"I was thinking am I going to get arrested? Am I going to get clawed up and bit?" he said.

The eagle was fairly sick when Braam found it and didn't fight back when he picked it up. It latched its claws onto Braam's arm and didn't let go the entire walk to the car.



Perry Braam holds an eagle suffering from lead poisoning that he found while walking through Minneopa State Park in January. Braam picked up the eagle and carried it 4 miles to his truck.

Courtesy Perry Braam

Courtesy Perry Braam

“Would you mind taking those claws out of my arm? You’re making my arm bleed,” Braam can be heard saying to the eagle in a video he took of the encounter.

Once at the Raptor Center, the eagle had be euthanized because of the permanent damage the lead had done to its brain and nervous system.

“Lead toxicity is actually one of the most frustrating things we deal with because it’s completely preventable,” said Victoria Hall, director of the Raptor Center.



A bald eagle suffering from lead poisoning is treated at The Raptor Center in St. Paul. The eagle isn't able to stand up because the lead has damaged its nervous system.

Courtesy of The Raptor Center

Eagles that come into the Raptor Center unable to stand up properly or fly anymore have permanent damage, and the poisoning is almost always fatal at that point, Hall said. If they can detect the lead before symptoms appear, the center can treat the eagles, giving them fluids, injections and medication to help get the lead out of their system.

Hall and others have been trying to educate hunters about the impacts of lead and encourage them to use other types of bullets.

“Despite all the education that is out there though, we are just not seeing the numbers of eagles suffering from lead toxicity going down,” Hall said.

She said a big problem is that many hunters still don’t know that lead fragments can remain in the carcass, even if the bullet and area around it is removed.

“Hunters play an amazing role in taking care of the ecosystem,” Hall said. “I think some folks just don’t know this is happening.”

About 95% of the 10 to 13 billion rounds of ammunition purchased in the U.S. each year are lead, according to the New York Times.

Chuck Hammer uses lead bullets while hunting because they are fairly dense, and he can usually kill the deer with them. Hammer, a board member of the Bend of the River Chapter of the Minnesota Deer Hunter’s Association, helps train and educate future hunters at Forkorn Camps. He said these youth learn to remove the guts and organs of a deer properly and ensure tissue around the bullet is removed so fragments from bullets are taken out.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources conducted a study on deer hunter’s use of lead bullets and recommends hunters trim liberally around the wound to remove lead fragments. The recommendations say there’s no definitive answer for how much area should be trimmed to remove all fragments, but the study found lead particles as far as 18 inches away from the wound.

Lead is a soft metal so a lead bullet can fragment when it connects with its target, breaking into pieces that may not be visible to the naked eye.

These fragments disperse and end up in the meat and organs. Gut piles and carcasses of these animals are sometimes left behind in fields after a hunt and are later found and consumed by eagles.

“They are a delicious meal choice for a bald eagle,” Hall said.

She said the problem is that eagles inadvertently consume tiny lead fragments as they eat the carcasses. A lead fragment only half to 1 centimeter can cause fatal lead poisoning in eagles. Within a matter of hours, eagles may lose their balance and ability to fly. Many suffer from gasping and tremors.

Hall said the eagles suffering from lead toxicity are often larger and stronger than most because the larger eagles are the ones able to scare off other eagles and claim the carcasses for themselves.

Lead fragments are problematic for people as well because small pieces can end up in the meat hunters bring home.

The DNR received a petition in 2019 from conservation and environmental groups requesting rules be established prohibiting the use of lead shot, lead ammunition and lead tackle on state wildlife.

The department denied the petition, writing that given the scope of the proposed rules and number of stakeholders potentially impacted, the rules should be brought to the Legislature.

Lead ammunition for waterfowl hunting has been banned in Minnesota since 1987 because of its toxicity, but it is still legal when hunting other types of game.

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