

LEAD: Blue Mountain Wildlife will x-ray game meat for lead fragments

Continued from 1A

every time she hears that a hunter such as Peckham has converted to non-lead bullets or shot. She sees the unintended consequences of lead almost every day. Tompkins, executive director of Blue Mountain Wildlife, takes care of orphaned, sick and injured wildlife that are brought to the center. She routinely checks the blood of eagles, hawks and other scavenger birds for lead. Lately, high lead levels are causing her to do double takes.

Just for comparison, consider the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, where high levels of lead (considered toxic at over five micrograms of lead per deciliter) showed up in the blood of Flint children.

Tompkins measures much higher levels in her feathered patients. In the last few months, she found blood levels in several bald eagles and hawks as high as 209 micrograms per deciliter and another at 411.

"That eagle had the highest lead level I've ever measured," Tompkins said. "He could stand, but he couldn't walk."

Tompkins uses chelation to clean some of the lead from their blood, but many are too sick for it to do any good. If the lead moves to other parts of their bodies, she said, it never leaves. The bird with the 411 level died quickly.

Hawks, eagles, owls and

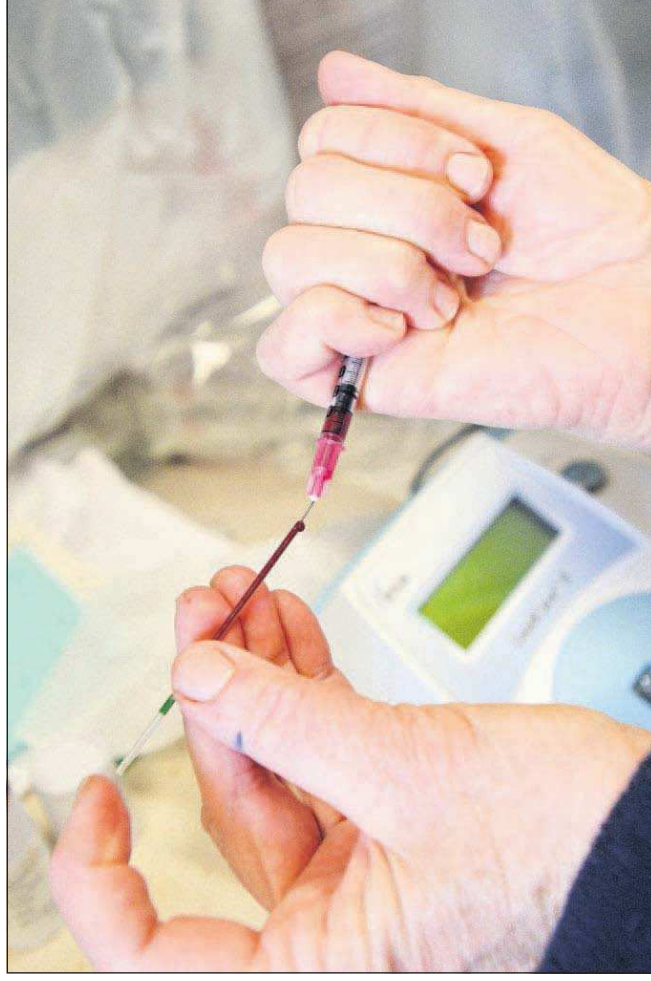
other birds are exposed to lead when they ingest lead shotgun pellets or bullet fragments. The birds scavenge dead animals shot but not recovered by hunters. They come across gut piles and carcasses of animals such as squirrels and jack rabbits shot as varmints.

California is in the process of banning lead ammunition completely by 2019. Oregon prohibits lead ammunition for shooting waterfowl in accordance with federal regulation, but leaves the choice up to hunters for other types of game.

Hunters have accepted the idea of steel shot for waterfowl, but are slower to come around to copper bullets, said Jim Akenson, conservation director for the Oregon Hunters Association.

"They are familiar with the performance of steel shot now. The skepticism is pretty much gone," Akenson said. "Copper bullets are in an earlier (and voluntary) phase of acceptance. I think it's going to be baby steps."

Tompkins worries about the health of hunters and their families as well as birds. She cited a 2008 University of North Dakota study where researchers used tomography to detect lead fragments in packages of ground venison donated by hunters to a food pantry. Fifty-nine percent of the packages had one or more visible metal fragments. Another group of researchers



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Lynn Tompkins prepares a blood sample from a red-tailed hawk to test lead levels at Blue Mountain Wildlife in Pendleton.

fired lead and copper bullets into ballistic gelatin to find that lead bullets break into hundreds of small pieces when they strike an animal, while copper stays more than 98 percent intact.

The studies recently prompted Tompkins to offer a service to the public. She urges people to bring

in packages of game meat (thawed or frozen) to Blue Mountain Wildlife and she will x-ray them to determine whether lead fragments are present. She said the process is quick and she can x-ray multiple packages at once. She's curious at what she will find.

"I'll x-ray the meat for

free and we'll see what's in it," Tompkins said. "Maybe we won't find anything, but maybe we will."

The biggest exposure to birds may come from hunters who shoot agricultural pests and other animals such as coyotes, squirrels, prairie dogs and jackrabbits.

"A lot of times, the carcasses are left on the landscape," said Leland Brown, Wildlife and Lead Control Coordinator for the Oregon Zoo. "We end up with a lot of lead left out there. With steel shot or copper bullets, that wouldn't be a problem."

Brown has visited five sportsmen shows in recent months where he talked with more than 4,000 people about the dangers of lead to both hunters and wildlife. He played videos showing lead fragmenting into hundreds of little pieces.

"A very consistent comment was 'Wow, I never thought about this,'" Brown said.

Brown, himself a hunter, has faith that hunters will gradually embrace non-lead ammunition.

"Hunters have a long history as conservationists and taking care of our wildlife. We want to live up to what's been passed down to us," Brown said. "No one wants to go out into the woods and never see another eagle again."

Brown and Akenson believe hunters resist for a variety of reasons. Some have large stockpiles of lead ammunition they want to

use before switching. Others balk at the higher cost of non-lead shot and bullets. Performance and availability are two other issues that are constantly evolving.

An informal survey of ammunition prices show a difference in cost between lead and copper bullets. Cabela's, for example, charges \$32.99 for a box of Hornady Superformance lead bullets and \$42.99 for Superformance copper bullets. A look into a couple of local sporting good stores showed copper bullets in supply but not moving swiftly off the shelves.

Jim Faris, who stood behind the counter in the hunting section of D&B Supply, said he expects that to change eventually. Faris shares the latest research with his customers about the differences in power. Copper bullets travel farther into the animal for more humane, one-shot kills and do not break apart.

"Copper bullets do not fragment," he said. "They retain 99 percent of their original weight."

Rick Hadden, owner of Garner's Sporting Goods, said copper bullets perform well and don't cost much more. He said resistance to using them is less about cost than human nature.

"We're creatures of habit," he said. "We're slow to switch."

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