

THE Durango HERALD

Article published Oct 15, 2014

The unintended consequences of lead bullets

By Donald Bruning
Living with Wildlife Advisory Board



The Peregrine Fund/Associated Press

This California condor, found dead at Zion National Park, is believed to have died from lead poisoning after foraging on a bullet-ridden game carcass.

For at least the last 50 years, health officials have warned the public about the dangers of lead exposure to children. Any increase in lead levels in the bloodstream can adversely affect the development of young brains. Emphasis on lead in paint and other materials has been of great concern, but little or no attention has been given to another source of lead ingestion: lead in wild game meat left there by lead ammunition during hunting.

In addition to the people who eat the game, lead poisoning from hunting can affect many species of wildlife that eat carcass remains left by hunters. Many states and localities have moved to get hunters to change shotgun ammunition from lead to alternatives like steel because the lead shot was consumed by waterfowl and often proved lethal to these birds.

Efforts to save the endangered California condor – using a very expensive program involving captive breeding and release into the wild – were hampered by the discovery that most condor mortality in the wild is attributable to lead poisoning. Reintroduction

efforts at the Vermilion Cliffs, north of the Grand Canyon, were threatened by lead ingestion when condors fed on gut piles left by hunters on the Kaibab Plateau.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department started a hunter education campaign that included providing hunters with copper ammunition for use in that area. This program was so successful that fewer condors in the area need to be treated for lead poisoning each year.

Last year, 96 percent of the hunters in the region cooperated with the program. Unfortunately, condors that go south of the Grand Canyon or north to Zion National Park continue to die of lead poisoning. This is a potential issue for La Plata County, as condors have been seen in Colorado as close as Mesa Verde in recent years.

Studies have shown that fragments of lead bullets can disperse into an animal's flesh as much as 6½ inches when shot with a high-powered rifle. Newer ammunition with higher velocity fragments can disperse even more if it hits a bone. Most of these fragments are so small they are not visible to the naked eye (but can be seen on radiographs), meaning they can easily be eaten by children along with the meat.

Researchers in the Dakotas and Wyoming recently released a study about the levels of lead in the blood of children whose families consumed at least one wild game meal per week. The shocking results showed a 5 percent increase in blood lead levels in these children compared with the general population. Five meals a week increased the levels by up to 20 percent. After these results were published in USA Today, both Dakotas began campaigns to use alternate, non-lead ammunition.

Isn't it time for Colorado to join these states to educate hunters and the public about the dangers of lead poisoning to wildlife and children? Hunters are encouraged to consider using non-lead, alternative ammunition. Hunters and the public are encouraged to demand ammunition companies produce viable and cost-effective non-lead ammunition.

Donald Bruning is a retired curator for the Wildlife Conservation Society and a member of the La Plata County Living with Wildlife Advisory Board.
