

COUNTERPUNCH ≡

FEBRUARY 28, 2022

National Bird at Risk from Environmental Toxins

BY LISA OWENS VIANI



Bald eagle, Lewis & Clark National Wildlife Refuge. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

Our national bird, the bald eagle, is under siege from environmental contaminants. A new study, as reported in The Seattle Times, found that over 50 percent of bald eagles have lead in their systems, and another national study, published last year, found anticoagulant rat poisons in over 80 percent of bald eagles and 77 percent of golden eagles.

Seattle's Urban Raptor Conservancy is studying rodenticides in the city's birds of prey, including bald eagles; they have found anticoagulants in almost all of the raptors tested to date. If the poisons do not directly kill a raptor (or other wildlife), they can weaken them and make them more susceptible to other causes of death. We need state and national legislators to act now to protect birds of prey from these poisons.

Bald eagles, along with raptors like peregrine falcons, finally recovered from the impacts of DDT, which caused their eggshells to thin, preventing successful hatching of new chicks. After heeding warning calls from scientists like Rachel Carson, our country finally banned DDT, and bird populations began to recover. And to prevent lead poisoning, California passed legislation banning lead ammunition.

But birds of prey and other wildlife now face a new threat that is just as problematic as lead or DDT: anticoagulant rat poisons have been found in insects, earthworms, and insectivorous songbirds—the entire food web. Last year, California and British Columbia both passed moratoriums on the use of the very

deadly “second generation” anticoagulants—otherwise known as “one feeding kills” products—while they undergo further scientific review.

Being killed or sickened by either lead or anticoagulant rat poison is an unacceptable fate for our national bird—or for any bird of prey, including hawks, owls, falcons, and vultures. Other wildlife—mountain lions, bobcats, foxes, anything that will eat a rodent—are also affected by anticoagulant poisons.

There are better solutions to rodent control than using anticoagulants. One promising new method is fertility control, which Raptors Are The Solution (“RATS”) and several partners, including the FYXX Foundation and Seattle-based Parker Eco Pest Control, are demonstrating in a pilot project in Seattle’s Queen Anne District.

This project, the city’s first non-poison-based rat abatement as part of a redevelopment project, is designed to greatly reduce rat numbers, and is already achieving remarkable results, with a 90 percent reduction after only seven months. There are also other less deadly rat control methods that do not employ poison,

including exclusion and sanitation, inexpensive carbon dioxide, and products like traps and rat zappers.

Blood thinners have their benefits for human health. But unleashed into the environment—via every black or grey bait box tucked into alleyways or alongside buildings—they are wreaking havoc on our very best natural solutions to rodent control.

In California, the poisoning of apex predator mountain lions by anticoagulants ultimately spurred state legislators and Governor Gavin Newsom to take action with the passage of AB 1788.

In Massachusetts, poisoned birds of prey, foxes, and other animals have spawned legislation, H. 3991 (Hawkins), to better regulate these products. But the problem is ubiquitous in all 50 states.

Will more state and national legislators step up to protect the country's birds of prey and other wildlife? The fate of our national bird may depend upon such action.

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