

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Let's Get the Lead Out!



Common Loon and Chick
Corel Corp. photo

Let's Get the Lead Out!

Loons, swans, cranes, and other waterbirds can die from lead poisoning after swallowing lead fishing sinkers and jigs lost by anglers.



Sport anglers attach lead weights to fishing lines to sink the hook, bait, or lure into the water. Some anglers use lead-weighted hooks, called jigs. A sinker or jig may accidentally detach from a line and fall into the water, or the hook or line may become tangled and the line may break or be cut.

Many ducks and other waterbirds find food in the mud at the bottom of lakes. Most of these birds also swallow small stones and grit that aid in grinding up their food. Some of the grit may contain lead from anglers' equipment.



Trumpeter Swan and Cygnets
Corel Corp. photo

Waterfowl can die from lead poisoning after swallowing lead fishing tackle.



Trumpeter Swan
Corel Corp. photo



Common loon
USFWS photo

Biologists have studied the effects of lead sinkers and jigs on waterbirds, such as loons and swans, since the 1970s. Their ongoing research has documented that, in the Great Lakes region, the northeast United States, and eastern Canada where loons breed, lead sinkers or jigs can account for 10 to 50 percent of dead adult loons found by researchers. Research in New England suggests that this source of reported mortality for retrieved loons is of greater importance than any other observed mortality factor including tumors, trauma, fractures, gun-shot wounds, and infections.

Lead Poisoning

A bird with lead poisoning will have physical and behavioral changes, including loss of balance, gasping, tremors, and impaired ability to fly. The weakened bird is more vulnerable to predators, or it may have trouble feeding, mating, nesting, and caring for its young. It becomes emaciated and often dies within two to three weeks after eating the lead.

Safer Fishing Tackle

Lead poisoning does not have to happen.

Sinkers and jigs do not have to be made of lead. Inexpensive and ecologically sound alternatives to lead fishing weights are available. Anglers can use sinkers and jigs made from non-poisonous materials such as tin, bismuth, steel, and recycled glass.



New Regulations

To help protect waterbirds from getting lead poisoning, Great Britain banned the use of lead sinkers in 1987. In Canada, it is illegal to use lead fishing sinkers and jigs in national parks and national wildlife areas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently discussing banning the use of lead sinkers and jigs on Nation Wildlife Refuges where loons and trumpeter swans breed.



Common Loon on Nest
Corel Corp. photo

What You Can Do

Use non-lead fishing weights. You could save the life of a loon, swan, or other waterbird.

Ask your local sporting goods store to stock non-lead fishing tackle.

Discard old lead sinkers and jigs properly.

Spread the word. Tell other anglers about the problem with lead, and encourage them to switch to non-lead sinkers and jigs.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides the federal leadership to conserve, protect, enhance fish and wildlife resources and their habitat for the continuing benefit of people.

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