Don't shoot to kill

As hunting season approaches, even those animals not on the hunter's list have reason to worry. Why? Lead poisoning. Even though lead shot is not permitted for use while hunting migratory birds, you can still use it to hunt almost everything else.

It is estimated that each year, Canadian hunters shoot about 1200 tonnes of lead shot into the environment. And what does that lead do once it's in the environment? Lead from the breakdown of spent shot can be transferred to plants and animals, especially soil and sediment invertebrates and terrestrial and aquatic plants. When animals higher up in the food chain consume these organisms, they accumulate the lead in their body and are poisoned.

Birds of prey and scavengers can get lead poisoning indirectly by eating prey that has lead shot imbedded in their flesh. Many ducks and other water birds are directly poisoned when they accidentally ingest lead shot because they think it is food or grit.

In Canada, the species most commonly poisoned by lead shot are Mallards, Black Ducks, Northern Pintails, and Tundra Swans.

If a bird swallows about 6 lead pellets, it will suffer from acute lead poisoning and it will die within a few days. If it ingests lead in smaller amounts, then it will suffer from chronic lead poisoning, gradually become very weak, and slowly die from starvation.

Even if a bird doesn't swallow enough lead to kill it, it can still suffer from behavioral and physical changes that affect how it finds food, mates, builds a nest, or cares for its young.

Lead shot generally takes decades to break down in the environment. This means that animals can be poisoned long after the shot first fell to the ground or water and that lead poisoning can still be a cause of many waterfowl deaths long after lead has been banned for use in shot.

Several non-toxic shot alternatives have been developed and approved for use in Canada, including bismuth, steel, tin, tungsten-iron, tungsten-matrix, and tungsten-polymer. While many users claim that using non-toxic shot isn't as effective as using lead shot, the overall benefit of using non-toxic shot becomes apparent when weighing the pros and cons of each type.

When hunting with non-toxic shot, the only major drawback is a potentially higher rate of crippling loss and a lower success rate in hunting. The cons of hunting with lead shot include crippling losses, losses from lethal and sub-lethal lead poisoning of waterfowl and other wild birds through direct poisoning, losses from lethal and sub-lethal poisoning of raptors and scavengers through indirect poisoning, unnecessary lead exposure of humans consuming game killed with lead shot, and the eventual breakdown of metallic lead pellets in the environment and subsequent transfer of lead to plants and animals.

The current government regulations don't do enough to reduce the impact of lead on our wildlife. As users and stewards of this resource, we need to voluntarily take the steps to reduce our impact on the environment. The best way for each of us to do that is to choose not to use lead products while we are out enjoying nature.