

LEAD POISONING: Bald eagles face new threat

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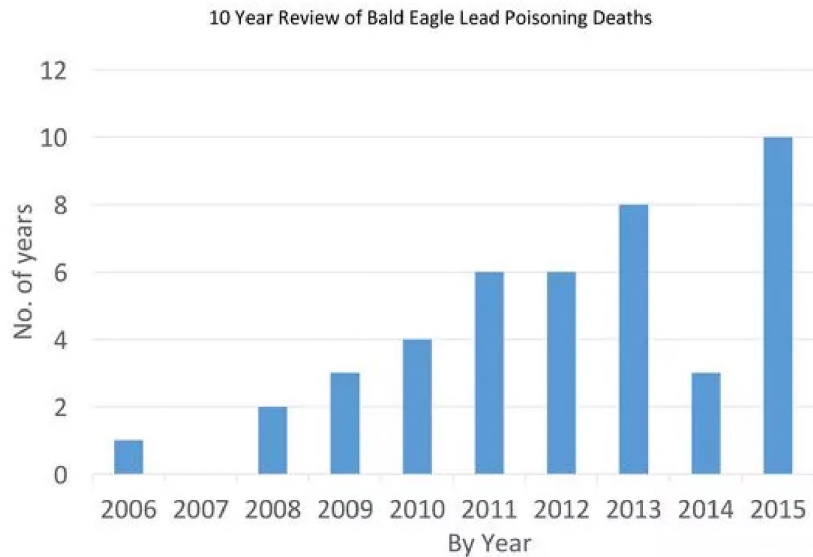
(Photo: Provided photo)

The majestic bald eagle has made quite the comeback in New York state since near elimination 50 years ago, but a new threat to the national symbol of the United States has brought some concern: lead.

New York State's Wildlife Health Program recently tested 300 bald eagles in the state and discovered 17 percent had lead levels high enough to cause death from lead poisoning. The program is a partnership between Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's New York State Animal Health Diagnostic Center and the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Bald eagle deaths due to lead grew from zero to 10 between 2007 and 2015. Nine eagles were found dead of lead poisoning in 2016. Dr. Krysten Schuler, who is a wildlife disease ecologist with the AHDC, said lead is a serious risk particularly to adult males.

"The next step is to fingerprint the sources of lead in bald eagle mortalities using lead isotope analysis and collaborate with Northeast states and provinces to conduct a meta-analysis of demographic and spatial data to identify patterns associated with lead poisoning," Schuler said.



A graph showing lead deaths among bald eagles in New York state. (Photo: the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's New York State Animal Health Diagnostic Center)

The impact of lead waste from human activity on the environment has become a major issue in the past few decades. A majority of the lead impacting wildlife has come from hunters and fishermen. The federal government instituted a national ban on the use of lead ammunition for waterfowl hunting in 1991 due to an estimated one million birds dying annually from the ingested lead, but lead is still used routinely in bullets and fishing tackle.

Lead has not been the only way humans have had a negative impact on the local bald eagle populations. Last week, [a man plead guilty to poisoning bald eagles and hawks in Addison](#) ([/story/news/local/2017/06/29/man-pleads-guilty-poisoning-bald-eagles-hawks-addison/440197001/](#)) bald eagles and hawks in Addison. In 2015, [a bald eagle was found dead](#) ([/story/news/local/2015/09/29/bald-eagle-shot-near-chenango-valley-state-park/73035868/](#)) from a gunshot wound near Chenango Valley State Park



Dr. Krysten Schuler is a wildlife disease ecologist with the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's New York State Animal Health Diagnostic Center. (Photo: Cornell University)

Bald eagles are no longer on the endangered species list, but they remain federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The maximum penalty under those acts are \$15,000 and \$100,000, respectively, and up to one year of prison time.

They are also protected as a threatened species by New York state.



A bald eagle spotted on Oak Street in Binghamton in 2007. (Photo: PHOTO PROVIDED)

No matter the threats caused by lead and other human actions, bald eagle populations continue to grow in New York state. Earlier this week, the DEC said the state's bald eagle population has hit a record of 323 breeding pairs.

Bald eagles were close to being eliminated from the state by the late 1960s, mainly due to the effects of the pesticide DDT. In 1976, the DEC started a program which captured young eagles from states with healthy populations and hand-reared them for release in New York. The program ended in 1989.

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William Benson spotted this Bald Eagle when it landed in his front yard along the Cayuga Inlet on Floral Avenue in 2012. (Photo: PHOTO PROVIDED)