Getting the lead out

Non-lead fishing tackle is an effective alternative, and it protects loons, eagles and other wildlife.

Tin and bismuth jigs and sinkers are comparable price-wise to lead and offer good performance.

Lead is a toxic metal that, in sufficient quantities, has adverse effects on the nervous and reproductive systems of animals. Found in most fishing jigs and sinkers, this metal is poisoning wildlife such as loons and eagles.

Tackling the problem

Anglers can now use sinkers and jigs made from non-poisonous materials such as tin, bismuth, steel, and tungsten-nickel alloy. And these alternatives are becoming easier to find at sporting goods retailers and on the Internet.

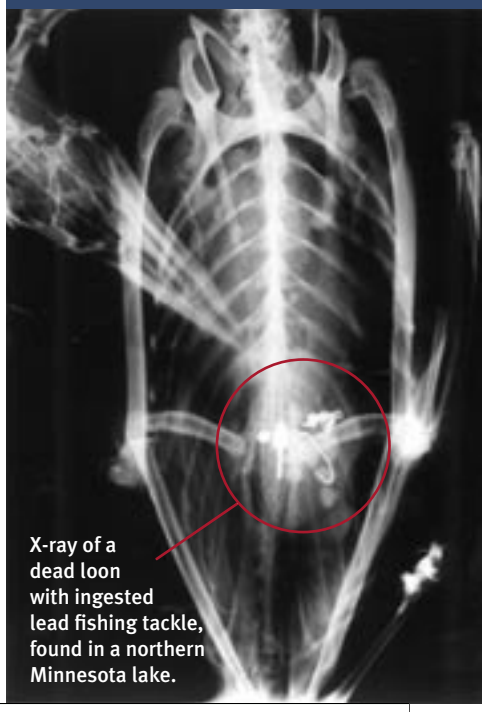
Steel

Tungsten-nickel alloy

Teach your tadpoles

Outfit kids' tackle boxes with non-lead weights. They are non-toxic and safer for youngsters to handle. Plus, it's a way to help instill a strong conservation ethic.

Leadbelly



X-ray of a dead loon with ingested lead fishing tackle, found in a northern Minnesota lake.

Bait and switch

Ask your local bait & tackle shop to carry non-lead products if they don't already.

Hook, line and sinker

When lead sinkers and jigs are lost through broken line or other means, birds can inadvertently eat them. Water birds like loons and swans can swallow lead when they scoop up pebbles from the bottom of a lake or river to help grind their food. They can also ingest lead by eating fish which have themselves swallowed lead tackle.

The dangers of lead poisoning

A bird with lead poisoning will have physical and behavioral changes, including loss of balance, gasping, tremors, and impaired ability to fly, mate and nest. Loons die within two to three weeks after swallowing a lead sinker or jig.

Sink like a stone

These pebbles and sinkers were found in the gizzard of a lead-poisoned loon. Loons swallow pebbles to help grind up their food. Unfortunately, sinkers can be quite similar to the stones the birds are looking for.

What's the risk? Weigh the evidence:

While it is hard to get an accurate count of water birds and birds of prey that die from ingesting lead tackle, current research indicates that lead poisoning is a serious concern. Research on loons from six New England states has shown that on the majority of lakes where dead adult breeding loons were found between 1987 and 2002, about 26% of these loons died from lead poisoning. Some lakes were identified as hot spots with lead causing over 50% of documented causes of death. In Michigan, another 15 year study examined 186 dead loons and revealed that lead poisoning — primarily from lead jigs — was the number one cause of death at 24% (44/186) of overall mortality.

Limited research in Minnesota has also documented lead poisoning of loons. A study conducted by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency concluded that lead poisoning accounted for 12 percent of the dead adult loons with known causes of death.

Between 1980 and 1996, the Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota reported lead poisoning in 138 of 650 eagles treated by the Center. Since 1996, 43 additional eagles were treated for lead poisoning including 22 last year. Most of the time, the source of the lead cannot be detected as the birds have cast the material out of their systems. Because lead shot was banned in waterfowl production areas in the early 1990s, bullet fragments in big game carcasses, lead shot lodged in upland game and lead fishing tackle are considered possible sources of lead poisoning of eagles.

Species affected by lead fishing tackle

bald eagles
canada geese
common loons
common mergansers
greater scaup
great blue herons
mallards
mute swans
sandhill cranes
snapping turtles
trumpeter swans
tundra swans
white-winged scoters

— *Common Loon Mortality in New England, 1987-2002*
Tufts University

Price check

You can expect to pay a little more for non-lead tackle in general, but the difference is not great, especially for basic items. Steel is often less expensive than its leaded counterparts.

Tin split shot and unpainted jighead

	LEAD	TIN	STEEL
#3/0 Reusable Split Shot	.03	.04	.04
#1/8 oz. Painted Jighead	.40	.51	.25

Discard old lead sinkers and jigs properly. For example, you may want to bring them to your local household hazardous waste collection site during your next visit. Some scrap metal recyclers may also accept lead.

Tungsten putty

Brass

Densified plastic

Lawfully unleaded

In many areas, non-lead tackle isn't just a good idea — it's the law. Restrictions and bans of lead fishing sinkers and jigs are becoming more common in the United States and other countries. While there are no bans on lead jigs and sinker use in Minnesota, tackle manufacturers, retailers, lake associations, conservation organizations, sports enthusiasts and government are partnering to educate anglers about this issue and increase the use of environmentally friendly sinkers.

- New Hampshire has banned the use of lead fishing sinkers that weigh less than an ounce and lead jigs smaller than an inch.
- Maine and New York have banned the sale of lead sinkers weighing a half-ounce or less.
- Great Britain banned the use of lead sinkers in 1987.
- In Canadian national parks and national wildlife areas, it is illegal to use lead fishing sinkers and jigs weighing less than 50 grams, a ban that went into effect in 1997.
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has already banned lead sinkers in three wildlife refuges. It is currently discussing restrictions on the use of lead sinkers and jigs at other national wildlife refuges where loons and trumpeter swans breed.

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www.moea.state.mn.us/reduce/sinkers.cfm