



BirdLife South Africa

Position statement on Lead poisoning in wild birds

- BirdLife South Africa (BLSA) acknowledges that lead has been an effective and inexpensive element used in projectiles and fishing weights and that it naturally occurs in the environment.
- Exposure to lead can be toxic, even at very low levels. Sub-lethal levels of lead are known to cause neurological, tissue and organ damage as well as reproductive impairment, whereas at lethal levels lead damages the nervous system, causing paralysis and eventual death.
- Lead in ammunition as well as in fishing weights (traditionally made of lead), exist in a form that can be readily ingested by birds.
- BLSA supports the use of alternative shot to lead shot, advocates the replacement of lead-based ammunition, and strongly discourages the use of lead in other materials such as fishing weights.
- Under certain environmental conditions (e.g. acidic or basic water or soil), lead can be released and taken up by plants or animals. Similarly, lead may be absorbed by the human body when it becomes exposed to acid in the human stomach.
- Lead entering wetlands is especially hazardous to:
 1. Waterfowl, which inadvertently ingest the pellets as grit needed to aid digestion, thereafter being retained in the gizzard.
 2. Herons and all other fish-eating birds which capture fish that have lead tackle on them (fish who escaped from fishermen).
 3. Ground-feeding birds which also fall victim to ingesting lead.
 4. Birds of prey, through secondary contamination. Game animals which are shot, wounded and not recovered by the hunter, and which later die, can be subsequently eaten by scavenging birds (especially vultures) and this can cause secondary lead poisoning.

- Examples of effective, safe and reasonably priced nontoxic alternative shot are bismuth, steel, tungsten and copper pellets.
- BLSA acknowledges that the removal of lead from ammunition and fishing tackle will require collaboration amongst affected stakeholders including policymakers, manufacturers of ammunition and fishing weights, professional and sports hunters and anglers.
- Lead shot is often not entirely removed by the butchering process and could be a significant health concern to high risk groups (pregnant women, children) who eat game meat.
 - o Lead is known to cause adverse neurological effects and stunted growth in children.
 - o See European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) opinion <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/scdocs/scdoc/1570.htm>
- Lead poisoning extends beyond the presence of lead in projectiles and fishing tackle.
 - o Although leaded gasoline and leaded paints are banned, lead continues to be mined, processed and transported.
- BLSA supports the promotion of greater public awareness and education of the consequences of lead exposure to birds, other wildlife and humans.