

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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SECRETARY MORTON ANNOUNCES FIRST PUBLIC USE OF IRON SHOT FOR HUNTING WATERFOWL

Interior Secretary Rogers Morton, whose Department sets hunting regulations for migratory game birds in the United States, announced today a pilot program on selected Federal hunting areas this fall using iron shot as a substitute for lead shot in hunting.

Spent lead shot, picked up accidentally by feeding waterfowl, poisons the birds and has taken a heavy toll of ducks, geese and swans over the years. Biologists estimate 3 to 4 percent of the waterfowl population of North America dies each year from lead poisoning, a loss of millions of birds.

Rising public concern over such losses is demonstrated by Maryland's consideration of a unilateral ban on lead shot for waterfowl hunting there, and by a request filed by the National Wildlife Federation asking a ban on lead shot everywhere before the 1973-74 season.

If this fall's program is successful, the pilot effort will be expanded the following season and iron shot may be mandatory for all waterfowl hunting by 1974.

"The arms companies, with their excellent wildlife conservation record, are cooperating fully," Morton said. "Regulations will have to be worked out and may initially cause some difficulties, but this waste of waterfowl cannot be continued. The time for action has come."

The Secretary added that waterfowl populations are generally in good shape, but "all hunters and conservationists alike are committed to ending lead poisoning."

There has been a long series of waterfowl die-offs from lead poisoning across the country over the last three decades.

In January and in March of 1972, over 6,000 dead or dying Canada geese were reported in three areas of Maryland and Delaware. Fifty of these geese, tested at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, had all died from lead poisoning. Several thousand more of the 80,000 geese using this area appeared to be ill. A similar outbreak occurred in the same areas in 1967.

Several thousand ducks died from lead poisoning this last winter in Illinois and Nebraska, reported Frank C. Bellrose, waterfowl biologist with the Illinois Natural History Survey.

Waterfowl deaths from eating lead shot have been recognized since 1894 and are reported in every major flyway. Geese, ducks and swans pick up the shot while feeding on pond bottoms, in fields or in any heavily hunted area where the spent pellets do not sink out of reach. Salts from the ingested lead damage internal organs, impair normal functions of the birds and usually result in death.

The severity of the problem was suspected in 1930 and confirmed in 1939-40 when 12,000 ducks died of lead poisoning at Herons Lake, Minnesota. A study of 36 other lakes revealed widespread occurrence of spent pellets in feeding areas. The shot remains available to waterfowl for many years.

Since 1940, several thousand tons of lead shot have been deposited in waterfowl habitat, each pellet capable of killing a duck if pulverized in its gizzard.

Extensive research has been done on shot which does not poison waterfowl, and soft iron apparently offers the best alternative. Iron shot was tested at Winchester's Nilo Farms in Illinois in 1964-65 and at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in 1968, and proved acceptable under controlled conditions. Field tests at Remington Farms in Maryland in 1971 demonstrated that iron shot is effective in killing waterfowl and, according to Remington, caused no significant damage to gun barrels.

A nationwide trial under field conditions is necessary now to see if iron shot performs satisfactorily in all types of waterfowl situations. A limited number of shells loaded with iron shot, in 12 gauge only, will be available for the trial this year.