

Get the Lead Out! Protecting Maine's Loons and Lakes
by Sarina Selleck, Maine Audubon volunteer

Common loons are a popular sight on Maine lakes and ponds. Tourists and residents look forward to sightings and listen attentively for their unique calls. Loons are ecologically and economically important to Maine, contributing to our biodiversity and our tourist industry. This year, new legislation was passed to better protect loons from the harmful effects of lead fishing tackle.

Lead poisoning from lead-based fishing tackle is the leading cause of death of adult loons in Maine; it is responsible for close to one third of the documented mortality over the past 25 years. Many anglers use lead weights (sinkers) and jigs to get their fishing lines to sink. These weights may be lost in the water when a line is broken or cut to release a fish. Loons may then catch the injured fish as prey, swallowing the lead along with the fish, or they may pick up sinkers or jigs along with the lake bottom gravel. Loons need to swallow gravel from lake bottoms to help digest their food and lead sinkers are indistinguishable from the stones that they need.

The ingestion of one lead sinker can mean death for a loon. Once swallowed, lead weights are dissolved in a loon's gizzard and are absorbed into the blood stream. The elevated levels of lead cause the bird to act strangely. Poisoned loons cannot fly, they swim unevenly and in circles, and experience tremors. They are unable to avoid predators and have trouble feeding, which in turn leads to an inability to mate, nest, and care for young. There is no cure for loons once they start experiencing these symptoms and they will die in as little as two weeks.

To help prevent lead poisoning, Maine Audubon worked to pass new legislation this year that bans both the sale and use of lead sinkers up to one ounce in weight and bare lead-headed jigs up to 2 ½ inches in length. The new law will ban both the sale and use of lead sinkers up to 1 oz. in weight, effective September 2013. The sale of bare lead-headed jigs up to 2 ½ inches in length will be banned as of September 2016, and the use of that tackle will be banned as of September 2017. It is important to note that even legal lead tackle is not safe for wildlife, so the use of lead-free tackle is always encouraged. There are plenty of fishing tackle alternatives available to avoid the use of lead. These alternatives are made from non-toxic materials such as tin, bismuth, steel, tungsten, and ceramic, and are available at large and small retailers alike. The difference in price is minimal, often as little as 50 cents to a dollar. These products are not only safer for wildlife, but also for humans. Current research, especially with regard to children, suggests that there is no safe level of exposure to lead. Limiting the lead around lakes and households is in the best interest of all parties involved.

You can help get the lead out of Maine lakes and help loons and other wildlife:

- Encourage your local sporting goods store to expand their stock of lead-free fishing tackle;
- *Spread the word!* Ask other anglers to switch to lead-free tackle;
- Discard lead sinkers and jigs properly—check to see if your local transfer station has metal recycling facilities or call the Household Hazardous Waste Program at the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (1-800-452-1942).

Maine Audubon is continuing to study the effects of lead and the causes of death of Maine loons. If you find a dead or injured loon, please contact one of the following:

If you find a dead or injured loon, please contact:

- Maine Audubon, *Dead Loon Hotline*: (207) 781-6180 x275
- For other injured birds, contact
 - York Center for Wildlife: (207) 361-1400
 - Avian Haven, Freedom: (207) 382-6761

For more information, please visit our website www.maineaudubon.org/loons

Sarina Selleck is a graduate of the University of Vermont and will be a first-year veterinary student at Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in the fall of 2013. This summer she is working with Maine Audubon loon mortality studies and education and outreach materials about the new lead tackle legislation.