

Lead poisoned turkey vultures linked to Paso

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BY: Josh Petray 2-5-08



Lead poisoned turkey vultures cared for by Pacific Wildlife Care and traced back to the Paso Robles area have prompted concern with volunteers linked to their recovery.

The vultures, reported by Paso Robles residents in the general vicinity of 14th through 19th streets, are suspected to have contracted lead poisoning after being shot with lead ammunition or eating carrion shot with lead ammunition.

The soaring scavengers' discovery by the care facility has sparked an open investigation by the California Department of Fish and Game.

"It's a huge concern," said PWC volunteer Kathy Duncan. "[Especially] with the California Condors and with all birds of prey. It [lead poisoning] just passes along the food chain."

The facility periodically treats golden eagles and other birds poisoned with lead. Upon receipt of an ailing animal, PWC rehabilitators will assess physical status, provide appropriate treatment and rehabilitate it back to health for reintroduction into the wild, according to its Web site, www.pacificwildlifecare.org.

Examination and testing for the poisoned vultures is being performed by VCA South County Animal Hospital's Dr. Stephen Paulick, and followup investigation is under way in coordination with University of California, Davis. The latter said the lead levels were "off the charts," according to Duncan.

A first turkey vulture discovered in October later returned to the wild came in with a broken wing. That bird was not tested for lead poisoning.

A second turkey vulture had probably been shot with lead ammunition as well as ingested carrion

that had been shot with lead ammunition, officials said.

On the third bird, X-Ray results showed “lead fragments” scattered throughout the gut, after ingesting lead-shot carrion, according to Duncan.

“That’s when we really started questioning,” she said. “By now we are starting to be a little concerned.”

The birds show some of the obvious signs of illness related to lead poisoning — mimicking neurological symptoms like curled toes and inability to stand, weakness and fatigue. The turkey vultures are currently being treated for their symptoms.

It’s unclear who is responsible for shooting the bird or the carrion with lead ammunition, PWC officials said.

According to Fish and Game Warden Todd Tognazzini, a primary roosting area is situated nearby the discovery site in near the residential neighborhood by a grove of grey pine trees.

But because the birds don’t necessarily stick to the general vicinity of their roosting areas, it’s a tough shot getting to the bottom of how they may have contracted lead poisoning, officials said.

“They roam such a wide area range it would difficult to find where they’re picking this up,” Tognazzini said.

Turkey vultures aren’t the only birds that show up at the facility with symptoms and diagnosis of lead poisoning.

In 1998-99 alone, the PWC cared for 12 golden eagles suffering from lead poisoning, officials said. It brought in an estimated total 1,100 animals last year.

A study by the Journal of Wildlife Disasters points to the fact that several California Condors have died as a result of lead poisoning. With sensitive populations that could be affected by the loss of only a few, there’s cause for public awareness, officials said.

Upon the recent discovery of lead in Paso Robles-linked turkey vultures, red flags went up for local caregivers and officials concerned about species survival. If the presence of lead poisoned turkey vultures at the center is any indication of the actual number of animals currently suffering in the wild, there’s reason to believe a problem exists, rehabber Claudia Duckworth said.

“There are still probably some out there that are dying off in some place quiet,” she said.

At PWC, Duncan is hoping for the eventual recover of the turkey vultures now in custody of the care facility. Rehabbers point to the long, painful death of birds suffering from lead poisoning.

“It’s a long, painful recovery,” Duncan said, and if they don’t recover, “It’s a long, painful death.”

As of press time, the facility received two additional lead poisoned turkey vultures from Arroyo Grande and two poisoned vultures in the vicinity of Morro Bay Golf Course.

Duckworth said she hopes that the public will realize that the cost of using lead doesn’t outweigh the tragic consequences of its presence in the environment as witnessed by the suffering turkey vultures.

“We just hope that the public will take it upon themselves to realize that whatever the reason is that they have for using lead, that there are better reasons not to lose lead,” she said. “The public may have reasons that they believe justifies using lead, but I don’t think anyone can justify what happens to these animals.”

Fish and Game is actively soliciting any information in the investigation. Anyone with information on the lead poisoned turkey vultures or to report illegal activity pertaining to fish and game is urged to call the department’s Caltip line at 888-334-2258

Pacific Wildlife Care is a nonprofit, 100 percent volunteer organization based in Morro Bay. The people who volunteer there are trained to rehabilitate sick, injured and orphaned wildlife. Its success is solely dependent on memberships and donations, according to its Web site.

For more information on Pacific Wildlife Care, call 543-WILD, visit www.pacificwildlifecare.org.