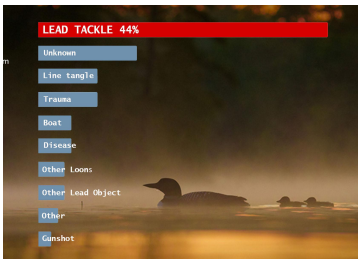
Loons and Lead Fishing Tackle: *The Facts*



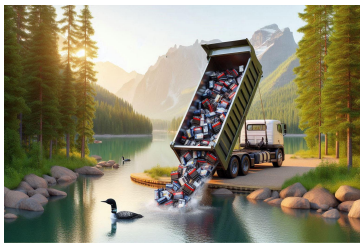
Ontario's official bird, the Common Loon, is in trouble.

Yes, this iconic beauty, whose haunting call graces so many Ontario lakes and rivers, is in serious decline across our province, and most of Canada. A recent study has shown that breeding success has declined by over 30% since the early 90's in Ontario, and is now critically close to the minimum level needed to sustain the species (0.48 chicks per mated pair per year).[1,9]



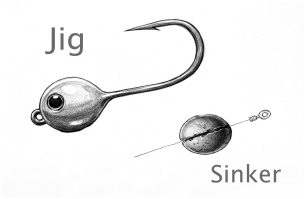
Lead poisoning is the #1 cause of death in adult loons.

While several factors are contributing to the decline and vulnerability of the species, studies in Ontario and across North America have identified lead poisoning from ingested fishing tackle as the leading cause of death in adult loons.[2,3,4,9] (And, at least 78 other species are documented as suffering from lead poisoning, including bald eagles, great blue herons, trumpeter swans, ospreys, mallards, and mergansers.)



The lead equivalent of 20,000 car batteries enters our lakes and rivers annually from lost fishing gear.

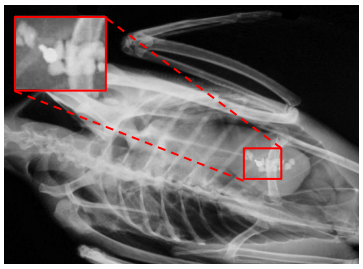
An estimated 180 metric tonnes of lead from sinkers, jigs and other tackle is lost in Ontario's fresh waters every year.[5,6] That's about 20,000 car batteries worth, or 44 fully loaded dump trucks worth, of lead dumped in our lakes and rivers every year.





Lead is invisible to loons as they forage for food.

Loons ingest small pebbles from lake bottoms to help grind food in their gizzards. In this image of an Ontario lakebed, 7 pieces of lead tackle were added to show how a loon might inadvertently mistake them for a pebble. And because loons swallow their prey whole, including fish 12" or more, they are susceptible to consuming fish with tackle embedded, such as when fish break the line or anglers cut the line. Loons are also known to grab at fish and baits as they are being reeled in. In all these cases, loons can literally swallow "hook, line, and sinker," leading to lead poisoning.



A loon dies painfully within 2-4 weeks of ingesting lead.

Lead is a soft and toxic heavy metal. Once ingested, the grinding action of a loon's gizzard reduces the lead to fine particles which then pass into the bloodstream, poisoning the loon's tissues and organs. The lead from just one small lead split shot sinker is enough to poison a loon, killing it within 2-4 weeks of ingestion.[7,8]



Tungsten simply outperforms lead and is safe for loons.

Tungsten is more dense and durable than lead, giving anglers several advantages, e.g.:

- Superior transmission of subtle bites
- 70% higher density = smaller size for same weight
- Sinks faster with less water resistance & fewer snags
- Better return on sonar electronics

And tungsten does not poison loons like lead does. Other safe alternatives include steel, tin, bismuth, ceramic and glass. While alternatives can cost more, when an angler's overall expenses are considered, the cost of switching to lead-free tackle has been estimated at a modest 0.3% to 3.6% for an assortment of sinkers and jigs.[3]

1 "Canadian lakes loon survey", 40 year report, birdscanada.org, 2021.
2 "Population-level effects of lead fishing tackles on common loons", Tiffany Grade, Journal of Wildlife Management, 2017.
3 "Lead fishing sinkers and jigs in Canada : review of their use patterns and toxic impacts on wildlife", A.M. Scheuhammer et al., Canadian Wildlife Service, 2003.
4 "Maine loon mortality", Susan Gallo, Maine Audubon 2013
5 "Study to gather use pattern information on lead sinkers and jigs and their non-lead alternatives in Canada", Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2018.
6 "Survey of recreational fishing in Canada 2015", Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2015.
7 "Lead poisoning in loons", U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.
8 Xray photo credit : Avian Haven
9 Loon family photos by Matt Huras
Visit fishleadfree.ca for more information.