

A Fact-Finding Mission with Margie Manthey This Fishing Season - FULL INTERVIEW

- [Tanya Hammond](#) | Local Journalism Initiative Reporter | Review-Mirror
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Let's Get the Lead Out and help protect loon families like this one spotted on a local lake. Responsible fishing practices can help protect our loons. Photo Credit: Tanya Hammond.

As summer approaches and area anglers prepare for the long-awaited bass opener on June 20, excitement builds across cottage country. Boats are tuned, bait shops are buzzing, and families are gearing up for Father's Day weekend on the water. This particular weekend also marks one of only four licence-free fishing periods in 2026, meaning even more people will be casting lines into local lakes.

However, amid the anticipation, one crucial question often goes unasked: Are we fishing with lead-free tackle? And why does it matter?

Most people understand the dangers of lead in paint, pipes and imported toys. Yet lead fishing tackle, including sinkers, jigs, and lures, remains widely sold and used despite its well-documented toxicity. When these items break off or are lost in the water, they pose a serious threat to wildlife. According to research cited by the National Library of Medicine, even low-dose, long-term exposure to lead can cause significant health and cognitive impairments in humans, let alone wildlife.

To understand the scope of the problem and the local efforts to address it, I sought out our own Nature Expert and columnist, Margie Manthey, co-leader of 'Let's Get the Lead Out,' an initiative of Fish Lead Free Canada. Alongside project partner Donna Garland, Margie has helped spark a province-wide movement to eliminate lead tackle from Ontario's lakes.

Q: What first opened your eyes to the issues surrounding the use of lead tackle in our lakes? Was there a specific moment or story that sparked the Let's Get the Lead Out initiative?

A: Lead poisoning in loons from lead fishing tackle first came on my radar when a Wild

Around Westport reader wrote in requesting an article exposing the issue. I had never

heard about it before and remember feeling bowled over as I researched the topic, because I've been fishing my whole life and am a staunch advocate for good stewardship. So I fell down the proverbial rabbit hole, and by the time the

article was finished, I knew I had to do something to create positive change to protect vulnerable wildlife from lead poisoning.

Q: When you and Donna Garland launched Let's Get the Lead Out through the Wolfe Lake

Association in 2022, what did you hope to accomplish? Did you envision the project growing to include 45 other lakes across the province, as it does now, in just a few years?

A: Our goals were multifaceted. Let's Get the Lead Out (an initiative of Fish Lead Free Canada) was designed to help raise awareness of lead poisoning in aquatic wildlife; incentivize anglers to switch to lead-free tackle alternatives; encourage retailers to offer more non-toxic tackle to consumers; and reduce the accumulation of lead fishing tackle in the environment by collecting it from the community. We received an overwhelmingly positive response from the community, including other lake associations that wanted to join the charge against toxic lead. Now and then, as Donna and I marvel at the movement's consistent growth, we look at one another and say, "Wow. Look how far we've come!"

Q: How does your personal connection to Wolfe Lake influence your commitment to this cause?

A: I feel as though Wolfe Lake is part of my DNA, that it is irrevocably intertwined with the very essence of who I am and what I stand for. Nearly five decades of loving a place so fiercely that it's hard to put into words. I feel this tremendous sense of commitment towards protecting and preserving the natural splendour of the lake, including the wildlife that calls it home and shares it with me.

Q: What have been some of the most meaningful partnerships or moments since beginning this project? How has the Wolfe Lake Association helped?

A: Since its launch, Let's Get the Lead Out has enabled us to engage with many like-minded people invested in clean, safe, and sustainable natural resources. While all partnerships play a positive role in strengthening the initiative, working alongside the Charleston Lake Association (CLA) has been particularly rewarding. The Wolfe Lake Association helped CLA develop its lead-free fishing program, and today we work as a team, particularly on the petition urging provincial legislators to ban certain sizes of lead tackle. CLA's Ron Evers was an integral part of drafting the petition and speaks in one of our new awareness videos. Partnerships with the Westport Lions Club and the Chaffey's Area Lakes Association (CALA) have been terrific as well, and the ongoing support received from the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Association (FOCA) is invaluable. Truly, though, the initiative benefits each time we "link elbows" with other folks committed to the fish lead-free movement.

Q: Have you tracked to date how many pounds of lead you have collected from those turning in lead?

A: Yes. To date, Let's Get the Lead Out has collected over 550 pounds of lead from the community!

Q: Most people don't realize how much lead enters Ontario's lakes each year. What facts or statistics are the most startling to you that you wish to share to help people understand the size and impact of the problem?

A: An estimated 180 metric tonnes of lost lead sinkers, jigs, and other lead tackle enter Ontario's fresh waters every year. That's the equivalent of around 20,000 car batteries'

worth, or 44 fully loaded dump trucks of toxic lead, dumped into our lakes and rivers –

every single year. How is this acceptable? Consider, now, how just one rice-grain-sized

piece of lead is enough to poison an adult loon fatally. In fact, lead poisoning from ingested fishing tackle is by far the number one killer of common loons, on average representing nearly one-third of all loon mortality. As loons rely on longevity to sustain their populations, the loss of one adult loon can have a negative impact on local populations. Meanwhile, lead poisoning from ingested lead tackle is, on average, directly responsible for one-third of all adult loon deaths. In some regions, it's even higher. And consider this: Canada is home to 95 percent of the world's breeding loon population. If Canada doesn't step it up and push back against toxic lead tackle, then who?

Q: Your current petition calls for a partial ban on certain sizes and weights of lead tackle,

similar to restrictions that have existed in Canada's National Parks for (nearly) 30 years.

Why is this particular regulatory change both practical and urgent?

A: Aligning Ontario's regulations on lead fishing tackle with those already in existence in the National Parks makes good sense, as it would include Provincial Parks as well as all other freshwater bodies province-wide to unify the law. A consistent policy would be less confusing for anglers and could streamline enforcement. Most importantly, it would have an immediate, positive impact on loons and other vulnerable wildlife – after all, they don't recognize park boundaries or borders. The best time to have a unified provincial law was decades ago; the next best time is now.

Q: The recent videos showing several area politicians, including Leeds-Grenville Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes MPP Steve Clark, Township of Rideau Lakes Mayor Arie Hoogenboom, South Frontenac Township Mayor Vandewal, and Lanark-Frontenac MP Scott Reid, to name a few, in support of the initiative are promising. What is your reaction to the amount of support you are seeing regarding your project and the current petition drive you are leading?

A: We are honoured to have a collection of strong endorsements from several provincial and federal politicians and are appreciative of their support, as well as their firm commitment to protecting our natural resources. Having elected leaders voice their support adds a layer of credibility to the initiative and helps advance the petition through the government's legislative channels.

Q: What would you say to Ontario legislators or individuals who may be hesitant to support regulating lead tackle?

A: First and foremost, I would say that supporting a restriction on lead tackle is simply the right thing to do. Those unfamiliar with the dangers to wildlife from lead tackle should invest a little time reading about the issue. There are numerous published papers documenting the negative impacts of lead fishing tackle on aquatic wildlife, based on irrefutable data from veterinarian- and biologist-led studies. One such study on loon mortality has been ongoing since the 1980s and clearly shows how the mortality percentage of lead-poisoned loons dropped after the enactment of a partial ban on one-ounce and under lead sinkers and jigs. Ethically speaking, anglers should be among the first in line to support

policies that safeguard the natural resources they so enjoy. That's good stewardship.

Q: What role do lake associations, cottagers, lake shore owners, and seasonal residents play in helping this movement forward? How can someone contribute on a personal level to reducing lead in our lakes?

A: Everyone can help make positive change! Lake associations can raise awareness and promote lead-free fishing by posting signage at their boat launches, and by engaging members at annual general meetings and through social media and newsletters. They can also collect lead tackle from their lake community, invest in lead-free tackle samples to hand out at events, and reach out to area businesses to donate incentive prizes, etc. Lake residents and seasonal cottagers alike can play an active role in the movement by talking to their neighbours, friends, and extended family about the importance of fishing lead-free and by asking for lead-free tackle when they shop. Some folks make a point of buying up used fishing tackle at garage sales and turning it in to help ensure it won't wind up in the water – or inside a loon. All of these things help to make a difference! Of course, signing the petition and sharing it far and wide is another way folks can help the movement, whether or not they are anglers or spend time on the water. U.S. residents owning property in Ontario can sign as well.

Q: What are some of the most accessible and affordable lead-free tackle options available locally?

A: Unfortunately, there is scant lead-free tackle available locally. Atkinson Home Hardware in Hartington has a small selection of tin and steel options available. Approximately 90 per cent of the tackle sold and used today remains lead-based. Most Ontario retailers – big or small – stock lead tackle. The best place to source a variety of lead-free tackle remains online, and buyers must be diligent about identifying lead-free items. As for affordability, tin and steel are safe alternatives to lead that aren't very pricey. Bismuth is middle of the road price-point wise and works well. Tungsten, on the other hand, is very expensive, especially when compared to lead, but tungsten is the "gold standard" of tackle and easily outperforms lead. Bottom line is, tungsten comes at a high price, but not at the cost of poisoned wildlife, so anglers can feel good about that. Besides, aren't our natural resources priceless?

Q: What has been the most challenging part of leading this initiative?

A: There are some "breaks in the chain" that hinder progress. As mentioned earlier, one problem is the lack of lead-free tackle available in stores for consumers. To address this, we work to connect retailers with manufacturers of lead-free tackle. For example, we helped ReCast Fishing get their 100% recycled-plastic, lead-free crankbaits into Canadian Tire in Kingston and

introduced them to local tackle shops as well. Another issue is that unless a particular piece of lead-based tackle or lure is sold in California, there is no requirement for the packaging to bear a warning label for consumers, so many people are unaware they are buying and using toxic tackle. The most common things we hear from the public are that they thought lead was banned, so they had no idea they were using lead tackle. Many people are genuinely flummoxed -- and disturbed -- when they learn how widespread the sale and use of lead tackle remains.

Q: What has been the most rewarding thing about taking on an environmental project such as this?

A: Watching our program grow exponentially from its birth back in 2022 has been incredibly rewarding. It's been spreading like a match to grass, sweeping across the province. The "Let's Get the Lead Out" tagline is definitely out there now and galloping off on its own legs. Meeting and talking with like-minded people -- that is, those committed to protecting and preserving natural resources and healthy wildlife populations -- has been an absolute joy. Also, knowing that each time a single piece of tackle is kept out of the environment, we are making a difference. Small victories for wildlife, and that matters.

Q: What does success look like for "Let's Get the Lead Out" over the next couple of years?

A: The golden ring would be the fruition of the petition into law. So we are pushing hard to garner as much exposure and signatures towards that goal. Meanwhile, we'll continue efforts to grow the initiative's reach and strength through connections with other lake associations, researchers, wildlife rescue and advocacy groups, and the general public, because it's all about advancing

the charge against lead. There is still plenty of work to be done, but we are fully invested in this endeavour and remain committed to its success.

Q: If you could speak directly to every angler in the area, what would you want to say?

A: As a lifetime angler, I appeal to fellow anglers to do the right thing to protect and preserve the resource we enjoy by committing to fishing lead-free. A great way to start is by replacing all lead jigs, sinkers, and weights weighing one ounce or less, a do-able, practical starting point that will have an immediate positive benefit for wildlife, one that helps ensure our children, grandchildren, and future generations of anglers will get to experience the thrill of an eagle soaring overhead or the haunting call of a loon heard across clean, sustainable waters. Small actions can have big impacts. It's up to us whether we help or hurt the environment.

“Studies have confirmed lead poisoning deaths in Eagles, Swans, Herons, Gulls & Terns, most Waterfowl (including the Common merganser, Mallard Duck, American Black Duck, Canada Goose), plus semi-aquatic mammals (River Otter & American Mink) - all from ingesting lead fishing tackle.” Why stand by and let that continue? This coming weekend, while making memories, make a point to check your tackle, take to heart all that Margie has shared with us, and choose to make a difference today to help create a more sustainable future for all. Fishleadfree.ca



Margie Manthey, the Fishing Director with the WLA, columnist of Wild Around Westport, and avid angler, encourages everyone to get out and fish and enjoy what they love while also being mindful of keeping lead out of the lakes. Photo Provided.