

# Let's Get the Lead Out, Charleston!

By Linda Whitmarsh

(Photo credits: C. Kanters, F. Milko, J. Joosten)



## Would you eat a lead lure? Didn't think so.

When you think of fishing on beautiful Charleston Lake, the peaceful scene would be incomplete without a nearby loon. These great Canadian birds are a key part of cottage life for everyone, be it paddling, swimming, boating, or enjoying time on the dock. Their haunting calls sing out with the crickets as we drift off to sleep at night. And yet, as you may have noticed, their population is dwindling.



## Why are the loons dying?

## What can we do to stop it?

Humans have known that lead was dangerous since 2000 BC. Some even surmise that it was drinking from lead goblets that led to the downfall of the Roman Empire. Despite this, lead was widely used in many manufacturing plants in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was an inexpensive and malleable metal, properties well suited for making fishing tackle and hunting ammunition. However, in the 1970s, scientists proved that lead is a fatal neurotoxin to all living things even in small amounts, resulting in global bans outlawing its use in paint, pencils, gas, and many other products. **Lead was identified as a major cause of bird mortality 20 years ago, and was banned from use in waterfowl hunting ammunition in Canada. Yet somehow, for the most part, its use in fishing tackle slipped under the radar.**

There are virtually no regulations against the sale of lead tackle in Canada. And yet loons, eagles, swans, and other aquatic birds perish from the ingestion of lead sinkers and jigs used in fishing every day. **If a fishing line breaks, either caught in the weeds or**



**swallowed by fish, the lead tackle falls off and sinks to the bottom of the lake.** Any angler worth their salt knows that losing tackle is a fairly common occurrence. Unfortunately, **many aquatic birds including loons mistake the fallen lead sinkers or jigs for pebbles and swallow them,** as small rocks are actually an important part of their digestion process. Sometimes, loons may even grab a lure, live bait, or a caught fish off your hook, breaking the line and swallowing the lead tackle along with your fish or lure.



Once lead is consumed, it makes its way into the bird's gizzard, and once there, their future becomes quite bleak. **The lead attacks the bird's nervous system, causing blindness, decreased reproductivity, and seizures, eventually resulting in a slow and painful death over 2–3 weeks.** Even small amounts of lead can impair a bird's ability to feed itself, nest properly, or care for its offspring. Paint or enamel coatings on lures don't protect our loons

either, as their digestive process grinds away the surface materials to expose the toxic lead beneath. It is estimated that over 500 metric tonnes of lead end up in Canadian lakes each year, the vast majority of which is lost lead tackle. Even worse: lead is an element, not a compound, which means that it doesn't break down. Therefore, it has been accumulating in our ecosystems for decades. A research project in New Hampshire spanning 30 years linked 40% of loon mortality directly to the consumption of lead fishing tackle, as well as a further 5% of loon mortality to lead poisoning from unknown sources (See: [www.fishleadfree.ca](http://www.fishleadfree.ca) to read the entire report).

**Lead leaches into the water as well, which threatens the lake quality for us humans too, especially for young children.**

It is extremely concerning that there is still virtually no provincial regulation for the use of lead in recreational fishing products. Low manufacturing costs and a lack of public awareness may be the reasons for its continued unlegislated use in our tackle. In fact, over 90% of fishing tackle sold in Ontario contains lead. Legislation does not even require a warning label to inform consumers of its presence, so shoppers have to actively seek out alternates made from metals such as tungsten, steel, tin or bismuth. A few states (like California) and our Canadian National Parks are the only jurisdictions in North America that have banned using lead fishing tackle.



## So, what have lake associations done about this issue so far?

In 2021, Margie Manthey and Donna Garland of the Wolfe Lake Association got the Lead-Free movement off the ground in Ontario by offering a lead buy-back program in the Wolfe Lake and Westport area, known as the “Let’s Get the Lead Out!” movement. In 2022, the Charleston Lake Environmental Association (CLEA) joined the cause. Now, 21 other lake associations have joined too, spanning 24 lakes across Ontario. The CLEA formulated a local Lead-Out program in 2022, where anglers could trade in their lead tackle for raffle tickets to win a variety of prizes, and gave away grab bags filled with lead-free tackle. Since then, the CLEA has collected over 35 kg (80 lbs)



of lead tackle. The lead collected was sent off to be recycled into car batteries. The CLEA has organized the spread of information on the topic in several ways, including: setting up information booths at the AGM and CLA Golf Tournament; creating education initiatives about the program at CLA day camps and the Charleston Lake Provincial Park; discussing the harms of lead tackle with individuals fishing on the lake; and putting up informative posters around the lake. Our goal is simple—we want to reduce the amount of lead in Charleston Lake in order to increase the health and population numbers of our neighbourhood loons, as well as other aquatic animals, birds and ourselves.

## What can *you* do about it personally?

The answer is pretty simple. Just **trade in your lead tackle**—jigs, split weights, line weights, lures, you name it—and **use it as an excuse to buy a whole new set of lead-free tackle!** If this seems overwhelming, start small – search out lead sinkers, jigs and lures in your tackle box that weigh less than one ounce, and bring them into the CLA Info Centre to be recycled. You can even collect lead tackle from your family and friends that fish and bring that into the CLA Info Centre too (109 County road 40, Athens). **Not sure if your tackle contains lead? Try looking on the packaging. If there is a warning stating that it is “Not for sale in California,” then your lure is lead-free. Otherwise, see the flowchart at the end of the article to help determine if your lure is made of lead.** If you are still unsure about what kind of metal is in your gear, the Info Centre has free testing swabs to help you identify the presence of lead in your tackle box.

You can also **do your best to avoid cutting a fishing line or leaving lead tackle in a fish that has been deep hooked.** These injured fish are easily caught or scavenged by loons or

**eagles**, and often swallowed whole, hook, line and sinker! When purchasing new fishing supplies, keep in mind **Athens Hardware**, a local retailer offering a selection of lead-free tackle. If your favourite shop doesn't have any lead-free options on the shelf, let them know about the loons, and you may be surprised at what they decide to stock next.

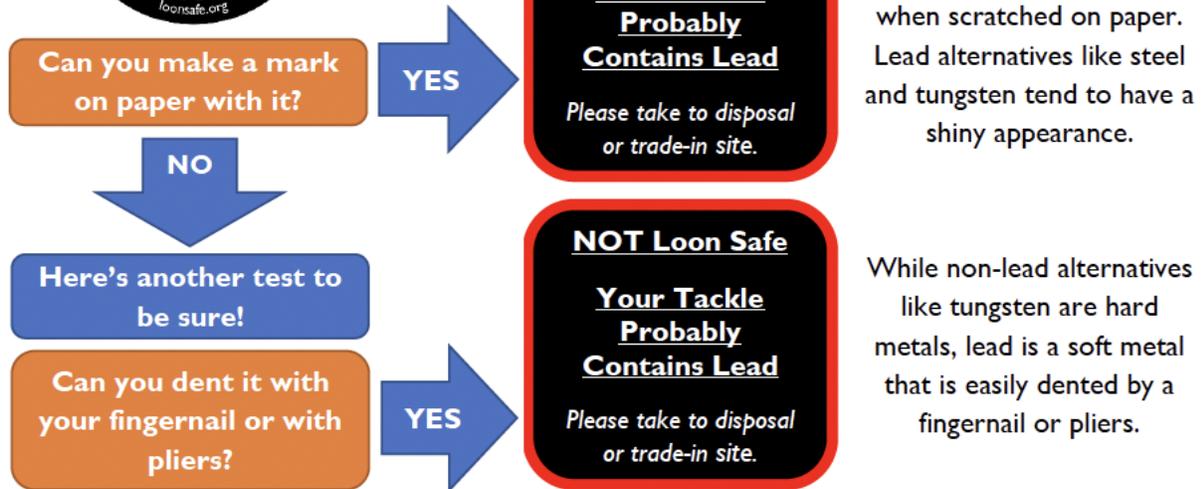
Most importantly, **if you happen to come across sick wildlife while fishing or boating around Charleston Lake, contact the Sandy Pines Wildlife Centre** in Napanee (phone: 613-354-0264, email: [sandypineswc@gmail.com](mailto:sandypineswc@gmail.com), website: [www.sandypineswildlife.org](http://www.sandypineswildlife.org)). If you're feeling really ambitious, you can call to your MP or MPP and demand a change in legislation, because an unhealthy ecosystem affects us all. Be sure to watch the CLA website [www.charlestonlakeassociation.ca](http://www.charlestonlakeassociation.ca) for updates on the Let's Get the Lead Out! movement. If you have any questions, concerns, or suggestions to help this movement grow, go to [www.fishleadfree.ca](http://www.fishleadfree.ca).



**Don't be a lout—Get the Lead Out!**



## How to tell if your fishing tackle contains lead (Pb)



**Is your tackle painted or covered by another coating such as a rubber skirt?**

Coatings on lead tackle **DO NOT** protect loons from lead poisoning. Coatings are quickly eroded by the grinding of the loon's digestive system, and the lead in the tackle is absorbed into the loon's bloodstream.

**Did you know?** New Hampshire law bans the sale and freshwater use of lead fishing sinkers and jigs weighing one ounce or less (lead poisoning from ingestion of this tackle is the #1 cause of adult loon mortality in NH). Whereas our laws have led the nation in protecting loons and other wildlife from lead, becoming stronger over time, the date of purchase can be used to estimate the likelihood that fishing tackle bought here (if weighing one ounce or less) contains lead.

Date Purchased	2016-Present	2010-2015	2000-2010	Pre-2000
Likelihood of Lead Content	Low	Moderate	High	Very High



### If in Doubt... Please Take it Out (of your tackle box)!

Loon Preservation Committee's LoonSafe Initiative includes a Lead Tackle Buyback Program that will give you a ten-dollar voucher to spend on new gear at participating local tackle shops when you trade in one ounce or more of banned lead tackle.\* If you simply want to dispose of your lead tackle for proper recycling, LPC and partners have established disposal sites throughout the state. See [www.loonsafe.org](http://www.loonsafe.org) for locations.

\*One trade-in voucher per customer per season. Other terms and conditions apply. View full details, additional offers, & participating retailers at:

**[HTTPS://LOONSAFE.ORG](https://loonsafe.org)**