

Condors may be poisoned

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Pinnacle California Condors must be tested for lead after feasting on a field of lead-shot squirrels. Nine of the 13 rare condors that roost at the Pinnacles National Monument must be recaptured and tested for lead poisoning after the birds dined on dead squirrels shot with lead ammunition, park biologists said. The birds were discovered last weekend feasting on a killing field of dozens of dead squirrels freshly shot by hunters on a hillside in an area off Highway 198, near San Lucas, but the marksmen didn't use non-lead ammunition. Condors eat only carrion – dead carcasses – and are highly susceptible to lead poisoning if they ingest lead bullet fragments. It only takes a micro-amount of lead the size of a pinhead to incapacitate the immense birds. Park biologists highly suspect the flock will have to undergo painful chelation injections to rid their bodies of the toxin. “We don't know for sure if they're contaminated, but the likelihood is very high given the circumstances,” said park wildlife biologist Jim Petersen. “So we've got to capture them and test them, and capturing a condor is no easy thing to do.” Biologists monitor the condors via GPS or radio transmitters affixed to the birds' great wings. Last weekend, the handlers noticed on the satellite monitor that most of the birds were coagulating in a place near Long

Valley near Coalinga, and drove to the rural area to investigate. “These two guys had been shooting a hillside all morning, and there were tens of dead squirrels. There were 11 different species of raptors there – crows, vultures, ravens – and the condors were attracted by that and came in and started eating everything,” Petersen said. News of the incident has refueled calls to the state legislature to ban lead ammunition in condor country, a swath of land throughout Central California that runs from Ventura to Alameda counties where the nearly extinct birds are known to soar from various release sites at Hopper Mountain, Big Sur and the Pinnacles. There are 44 free-flying condors throughout the state, the result of an intensive and costly reintroduction effort put forth by the federal government and nonprofit agencies, launched in 1992. “This is outrageous,” said Jeff Miller, spokesman for the San Francisco-based Center for Biological Diversity. The organization has been pushing for the ban of lead ammunition for several years in order to save the condors and other wildlife from secondary poisonings. Condors, however, are more vulnerable to lead poisoning than, say red-tailed hawks, because of their inability to regurgitate and spit out the lead. The CBD is now considering filing a lawsuit against the

state for not regulating lead ammunition. "This is no way to run a viable recovery program," added Miller. One of the problems, Petersen emphasized, is there are little ammunition choices available for those who use smaller guns for "varmint killings," such as ground squirrels, which compete with cattle for grasses. Non-lead ammunition is generally not available for 22-caliber or other smaller guns used for upland game. Steel shot is available for shotguns, but many hunters mistakenly believe that non-lead ammunition could harm their guns –including members of the California Fish and Game Commission. "If you mandate it, the availability goes up and the cost goes down," Miller said. "This was predictable, and there's something we can do about it. And yet the state refuses to act." Earlier this year, legislation for limiting the use of lead ammo was introduced in the state assembly, but as has occurred in times past, it didn't get past the state Fish and Game Commission. During hearings on the issue, commissioners

concluded there wasn't enough evidence to blame condor lead poisonings on lead ammunition. In 2003, Dr Michael Fry, a leading toxicologist of Washington DC, was hired by the commission to write a report on lead contamination in condors, and Fry concluded it was caused by lead ammunition in the environment and recommended restricting lead rifle bullets in condor territory. Fry supplemented the report in 2004. "Two-thirds of the wild population, on any given day, test positive for lead exposure," Fry said. "Lead is very clearly a problem for condors. But it was a mixed reaction from the commission. Two or three were skeptical it was a problem. And a couple of the commissioners were afraid to put non-lead ammunition in their rifles, a case of misinformation on their part. They did not understand that all lead bullets are copper-jacketed anyway." "But they were reluctant to even have it explained to them," added Fry. "They refused to let it be corrected. There was definite antagonism on the part of the chairman."

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