

Nature in the Neighborhood – May 2022

Rodent Poisons Are Killing More than Rodents

“I speak for the trees ... for the trees have no tongues,” is an oft cited line from Dr. Suess’ children’s book, *The Lorax*. It’s true that trees and other wild and natural things cannot speak for themselves, so it is up to us to speak for them. Today, I’ll speak for the eagles, hawks, owls and other birds of prey that are being needlessly killed, by of all things, by rat poison.

Certain rodenticides, call second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (or SGARs) are designed to kill rodents by preventing their blood from clotting. In other words, they cause the animal to slowly bleed to death. Unfortunately, these poisons can have unintended victims when wildlife, like birds of prey, eat the rats that have consumed the bait.

In a 2017 study, Maureen Murray, director of Tufts Wildlife Clinic and clinical associate professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, found that 97 percent of hawks (and 100 percent of Red-Tail hawks) tested positive for exposure to anticoagulant rodenticides. *

Then in May of last year, the first documented case of a bald eagle death caused by SGARs was confirmed by MassWildlife. Further instances of the poisoning of birds of prey by SGARs has occurred in Massachusetts as well as other states.

While EPA regulation has prevented the over-the-counter sale of SGARs, pest control professionals can, and do, still use them. Last year, California became the first state to ban SGARs. The *California Ecosystem Protection Act of 2020*, Bill AB 1788, bans SGARs with a few exceptions such as for food storage warehouse and agricultural food production sites, until completion of a re-evaluation by the Department of Pesticide Regulation.

Here in Massachusetts, *An Act Relative to Pesticides*, H3991, is pending in the legislature. The legislation mandates the use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) on public lands and public properties. According to the National Resource Conservation Service, IPM “ideally combines biological and cultural controls with limited pesticide use to keep pest populations below economically damaging levels, prevent future pest

problems, and minimize the harmful effects of pesticides on humans and natural resources, including wildlife.”

Given that most consumers are unaware of the effects SGARs are having on wildlife, the bill also requires that certified, licensed pest control applicators provide their customers with information on integrated pest management strategies, including a statement from the US EPA that reads in part: “All the anticoagulants interfere with blood clotting, and death can result from excessive bleeding. The second-generation anticoagulants are especially hazardous ... Predators or scavengers that feed on those poisoned rodents may consume enough to suffer harm. Non-target wildlife and pets can be poisoned if they eat rodent baits, as can predators or scavengers that consume rodents that have eaten certain poisons.”

Finally, the bill directs the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources to create educational programs around IPM and to move pesticide use reporting records online by 2022.

These are all steps in the right direction when it comes to protecting wildlife, pet dogs and cats, and children. You can help by emailing your local representative to express your support of H. 3991. Find your local state legislators at: openstates.org/find_your_legislator/

If you have a rodent problem, you can also follow the advice of MassWildlife to minimize to harm to wildlife:

- **Rodent-proof your home.** Before using a poison, remove or securely contain any potential food sources for rodents. Repair any exterior areas of your home to prevent rodents from coming inside.
- **Arm yourself with information.** Consider alternatives to poison, such as snap traps. If you do use snap traps make sure they're in a location raccoons, skunks, and other small mammals find it hard to get to.
- **Ask your pest control company questions.** Look for an integrated pest management company that uses multiple approaches to pest control instead of relying solely on poisons. You can request that the

company avoid using SGAR products including brodifacoum, bromadiolone, difenacoum, or difethialone.

Prevention really is the key. Sweep kitchen floors and wipe down counters regularly; take pet food up off the floor once the pet is done eating; move bird feeders far away from the house if you have them at all.

It's up to us to speak for eagles, hawks, owls and other birds of prey that frequent our neighborhood and to care enough to protect them from the lethal effects of poisons like SGARs.

As Dr. Suess would say: "unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

* now.tufts.edu/2020/09/16/understanding-risks-rodent-poisons-birds-prey