

Bald Eagle Mortality in Arkansas
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In mid-November 1996, a bald eagle carcass was found at DeGray Lake in southwest Arkansas. Through the end of January 1997, a total of 24 sick or dead bald eagles have been recovered at three lakes in the region. American coots with similar clinical signs also have been observed on DeGray Lake since early November. It is not clear if bald eagles become sick after eating affected coots or if eagles and coots are exposed to the same disease agent independently. Affected birds show loss of coordination and flight ability that progresses to tremors, seizures, and death. Postmortem examinations reveal that similar lesions are present in brain and spinal cord white matter of the eagles and the coots, but the cause of these lesions continues to elude investigators.

This scenario is nearly identical to a bald eagle mortality event that occurred at DeGray Lake 2 years ago (1994-95) when 29 sick or dead bald eagles were found (SCWDS BRIEFS Vol. 11, No. 1). The cause of the eagle mortality in 1994-95 remained undetermined despite extensive diagnostic investigations by several agencies. A huge cooperative effort has been mounted to investigate the current mortality event. Collaborating agencies in Arkansas include the Game and Fish Commission; Livestock and Poultry Commission; Department of Natural Heritage, Parks and Tourism; Department of Pollution Control and Ecology; and the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences Center. Additional organizations that have participated in examinations of affected eagles and coots as well as in field investigations include Henderson State University, the National Center for Toxicologic Research, National Wildlife Health Center, Ross Foundation, SCWDS, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Extensive diagnostic testing has failed to implicate any infectious agents. Continued testing is focused on possible toxicologic agents that may occur naturally, such as poisonous plants and algae or man-made toxins and environmental contaminants. Examination and analysis of bird tissues and stomach contents, aquatic vegetation, lake water, and sediment are in progress as are feeding trials to evaluate the possible toxicity of plant or animal materials from the site. Additional studies, including observation of local eagle and coot behavior, are planned as part of the effort to identify the source of the problem.