FACING THE DANGERS, PART 1: RODENTICIDES

BY DEBBIE WHEELER

The question I probably get asked the most when I am volunteering for the Vancouver Avian Research Centre is what my favourite bird is. My answer can vary, but I usually end up saying the Jocotoco. It is a long story, at the end of which is the cutest bird that you (well I) have ever seen. Google it – you'll have to agree with me! For many people, it is either a hummingbird or a raptor of some kind. I often have the pleasure of banding hummingbirds in the morning and then raptors in the afternoon, switching from using the smallest bird bands, just over 1mm in diameter for a Rufus Hummingbird, to the largest bird bands of over 28mm in diameter for a large golden eagle!

This has probably been the busiest season yet for banding raptors. We don't actually catch many at our banding site at Colony Farm. Our nets are sized to catch smaller songbirds, so larger raptors tend to bounce out of the nets. Most of the raptors that VARC bands are done through Orphaned Wildlife (OWL) Raptor Rehabilitation Centre in Ladner, Delta, BC. Their mission is to rescue, rehabilitate and release injured raptors from all around BC. Before the birds are released, they are fitted with a federal bird band with a unique identifying number so that if they are ever found again, the number can be reported, and

A Golden Eagle enjoying its prey

the bird's history can be seen. This allows OWL to see what happens to some of their rehabbed birds and to find out how well (or sometimes, sadly, not so well) their birds have fared following release.

This summer has been particularly busy for OWL due to the heat waves and fires throughout BC. However, the majority of raptors that are bought to OWL are there due to three major causes:

1. Rodenticide poisoning
2. Lead poisoning
3. Electrocution (especially for the larger raptors such as the bald eagles)

In part one we'll look at the use of rodenticides, the problems that they can cause for our beautiful raptors, and some of the ways that we can reduce or eliminate their harmful effects.

Peregrine Falcon

Western Screech Owl

Nobody wants rats or mice running around their house, in their basements or attics, chewing through wiring and drywall and eating food and pooping all over the place. We need to have a way to keep these animals out of our houses and to protect our property from their damage. But, do we want to damage other wildlife when we do this? The most obvious way to rid your house of unwanted furry creatures is to set traps and use poisoned baits to catch and kill the offending creatures. However, before we set those traps and put out those poisons, we should be aware of some of the possible consequences of doing this.

There are several types of rodenticides that can be used when trying to rid a property of rodents. Some are only licensed for use by professional pest companies, while some are available for use by the general homeowner. Most act as anticoagulants and work by preventing normal blood clotting. This causes a slow and painful death of the animal by causing both internal and external bleeding. Because death is slow, the targeted animal often leaves the site of poisoning and can then be taken by a predator such as a raptor, maybe an owl or a hawk, which will then ingest the poison via their food. The anticoagulant is transferred to the raptor, which is also susceptible to the anticoagulant effects of the poison, again leading to a slow and painful death, but now for the raptor, a non-targeted species.

The use of rodenticides is problematic due to their slow effects and the fact that the targeted species are food for various other species, such as owls, hawks, falcons, coyotes, foxes, weasels, dogs, cats and many other predators. Since the poison can be transferred to the predator, its toxic effects are not limited to the intended victim. To make matters worse, rodenticides are often ineffective in their overall goal, since poison on its own will often not control a rodent population. If other control mea-

sures are not taken, such as sealing a property to stop other rodents entering, more rodents will take up residence. If the rodenticide does enter the food chain and kill higher level predators, any natural control of the rodents will also be lost, leading to an increase in rodent population rather than a reduction!

Rodenticides cause harm to our environment and cause a slow and painful death to rodents and other animals. Surely there are other ways we can address our rodent problems? As with most things, there are alternatives to lessen rodent pest problems. Some possibilities include:

1. Blocking all access points to the building so that rodents cannot enter.
2. Keeping food sources secure. Use trash cans and containers that have tight fitting lids that rodents cannot chew into. Don't leave pet food outside and keep compost heaps secure and away from buildings.
3. Clearing vegetation away from the walls of your house and minimising hiding places close to your house.

Turkey Vultures

4. Using humane traps and removing rodents. There are several mechanical traps that can either live trap rodents for relocation or kill them in humane ways that do not affect other wildlife.
5. Improving surrounding habitat to encourage natural predators. If you have a suitable environment around your home, consider adding an owl box to encourage owls to your neighbourhood.

If you have a significant, recurring rodent problem, consider hiring a pest control company that uses non-toxic, control measures or that specialises in pest exclusion rather than pest destruction.

As of July 21st, 2021, British Columbia has issued an 18 month ban on second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides to reduce the risk of wildlife poisoning. These are commercial pesticides (used by certified operators and farmers) that pose a serious risk to people, pets and wildlife through poisoning. This is not a permanent ban, but hopefully it will allow some time for acceptable alternatives to be researched and approved in place of these lethal toxins that should not be allowed to enter the environment and poison our wildlife.

Please take some time to visit our friends at OWL and see all of the amazing work that they do to save our raptors and give them a second chance at life. https://www.owlrehab.org/

Birds pictured in this article are among the species most vulnerable to rodenticides, lead poisoning and electrocution and are often treated at OWL.