

COPPER BULLET DEMONSTRATION HIGHLIGHTS THE TROUBLE WITH LEAD



A lead bullet hits a barrel catch basin, where lead fragments can be collected by draining water.

By Javier Serna, Assistant Editor

Aitkin, Minn. — Thanks to the rain, only a handful came out for the copper bullet demonstration held at the Wealthwood Rod & Gun Club on Sunday.

But those who did show up overwhelmingly planned to leave lead bullets behind.

The Minnesota Chapter of the Wildlife Society put on the demonstration to allow local hunters to see the difference between the two types of bullets.

Lead bullets have been blamed for killing bald eagles and other birds that consume gut piles of deer that have been shot with lead bullets.

But the stuff isn't good for humans, either, particularly children, who have even less tolerance for exposure.

To prove their point, organizers of the event set up a pair of targets that used milk jugs full of water to capture bullets — in their entirety — that passed through the targets,

Participants were asked to bring their own lead ammunition, but the copper alternative would be provided to them, free of charge.

The copper bullets generally held together in one or two pieces and penetrated more milk gallon jugs than their lead counterparts.

The lead bullets, on the other hand, fragmented often into many pieces, some of which were like a fine dust.

"You'll never see them, you'll never get them, and you'll never taste them, but you'll get them," said Brian Hiller, an assistant professor of biology at Bemidji State University, as one lead bullet and all of its many pieces and fragments collected in a filter.

Carol Henderson, the Minnesota DNR's Nongame Wildlife Program supervisor, said that lead bullets typically lose 30 to 40 percent of their mass in fragmenting.

"That's stuff that's so fine a person

would never see that in their venison," he said. "It's like lead dust."

Copper bullets, on the other hand, retain about 98 percent of their mass upon impact, he said.

Alan Jensen, of Aitkin, had showed up to the demonstration and left a believer in copper.

He had no idea how much fragmentation occurred with lead bullets.

"I butcher my own deer and I do cut out the lead shot stuff, but the way that fragmented, I'm not cutting out near enough," Jensen said. "The copper held together much better. It really impressed. I will be switching."

Greg Varland, the manager of the club, was equally impressed.

He had never before used copper.

"It's amazing the difference," said Varland, of Garrison. "To see the difference in the disintegration in the lead, and how fast copper does a perfect mushroom, is incredible."

Varland said he didn't think copper's more expensive price would prevent him from using it. It's not that much more expensive than high-end bonded bullets.

"I don't go through that much," Varland said. "I don't think the expense will be a big deal for most people."

Don Sigford, of Aitkin, had never fired copper bullets before.

He was also impressed with the way they held together, and was already planning on making the switch by the time he had fired through the demonstration.

"It's just going to put less fragments in our

meat," Sigford said. His only question was if the copper bullets were as deadly as lead.

Hiller said it was. "You put it where it belongs and it will do the job," Hiller said.

Another shooter that was convinced to make the shift, Levi Stifter, of Aitkin, found the copper bullets to be more accurate, with tighter groupings at 100 yards.

"The deer we shoot, we eat," Stifter said. He was surprised by the way the lead bullets disintegrated, and worried that he was loving lead in his venison that was consumed by his family.

"That's something I had never thought about," Stifter said. "I had no idea. It is kind of concerning."

Stifter said he thought more hunters would start using copper.

"Once they see the difference and it gets out there more, I think it will be appeal to more hunters," he said.

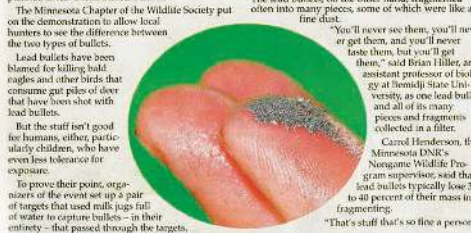
The Wildlife Society is planning another demonstration, focusing on shotgun hunters, at Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, on Sept. 7.

And Henderson is hoping for a grant from the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources, which has been preliminarily approved for about \$132,000, so that the DNR can put on more of these demonstrations starting next July.

"We want to promote non-toxic for a lot of reasons — for human health, for bald eagles, and for hunters," Henderson said.

Henderson and Hiller stressed that there won't be any effort on their part to change the law and force hunters to make the switch.

"We want this to be an



Much of the lead in this copper-jacketed bullet above shattered into small fragments. At right, demonstrators pour out water containing lead bullet fragments into a sieve filter.



Peter Sahr setting up a barrel filled with water jugs. Participants were able to shoot copper bullets on the dime of the Minnesota chapter of The Wildlife Society, which sponsored the event.



Much of the lead in this copper-jacketed bullet above shattered into small fragments. At right, demonstrators pour out water containing lead bullet fragments into a sieve filter.

Photos courtesy of Carol Henderson, Minnesota DNR