

Let them eat steel

by Mark Bellingham



Being shot at by hunters is not the only hazard facing waterfowl; they also have to contend with the wasted lead shot fired into our lakes and waterways, as field director Mark Bellingham reports.

SPARE A THOUGHT for the ducks – not so much perhaps for those that were shot during the hunting season, but for the hundreds which will die from lead poisoning in the next few months.

Lead poisoning does not occur as a result of being shot by a hunter. In fact lead pellets in duck flesh are more of a problem to hunters who break their fillings on them or ruin the microwave oven.

No, ducks contract lead poisoning from eating lead shot pellets. Hunters are notorious for missing their targets, and the wasted shot invariably ends up in our wetlands. Waterfowl eat the lead shot, which they mistake for grit, seeds, molluscs and insects. They actively seek it out with their sensitive tongues amongst the finer

sediments of lakes, swamps and estuaries. A mute swan in Denmark was found with 3,335 shot in its gizzard, the equivalent of about 15 shotgun cartridges. European and North American studies have shown that diving ducks are most likely to eat lead shot, followed by dabbling ducks and finally herbivorous and grazing species.

NZ's diving duck

In New Zealand our only wetland diving duck – the totally protected New Zealand scaup or black teal – may be similarly affected along with an array of other water birds. One scaup has been recorded with bone lead levels more than 20 times higher than those considered to be “abnormally high” by European wildlife experts. Swan deaths from lead pellet



Pukeko and the secretive banded rail are two species shown to be affected by lead poisoning.
Photos: Brian Chudleigh and Peter Reese

poisoning have been recorded on Lake Ellesmere since the 1950s. Mute swans, which overseas studies show are most susceptible to lead poisoning, have markedly declined on the lake.

When waterfowl eat lead shot, it goes down into their gizzard. Here it is ground down and dissolved by the stomach acids. The resulting toxic lead compounds are absorbed into the bloodstream and deposited in