

Toxic stew poisoning our birds, ourselves

KENNEBEC JOURNAL *Morning Sentinel* 03/12/2008

A comprehensive study unveiled this week by the Biodiversity Research Institute in Falmouth reveals that the state's birds are being slowly poisoned by a broad range of industrial toxins -- conveyed to them through their daily diet.

Researchers found mercury, pesticides banned years ago, flame retardants, transformer coolants (polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs) and industrial stain and water repellants (perfluorinated chemicals or PFCs) in the eggs of 60 birds. The eggs came from seabirds like Leach's storm-petrel, Arctic terns and herring gulls; birds of prey like osprey, American kestrel and bald eagles; ducks and cormorants and loons.

The species studied are found along the Maine coast, on Maine's rivers, in Maine's forests, nesting next to Maine's inland lakes or in the granite hills and cliffs rising out of Maine's glacier-scoured landscape. In other words, everywhere.

Somehow, the industrial chemicals are leaching out of the products they're in and getting into the food chain that feeds the birds -- a kind of toxic trespass on our wildlife. All the contaminants were found in all species, from swallows to eagles, and some species even contained a toxic soup of several contaminants.

"The biggest thing for me," chief researcher Wing Goodale told us, "was the fact that we found all of the contaminants we looked for in every species, every habitat, including loons on Moosehead lake and Leach's storm petrels that feed out on the outer continental shelf."

The findings aren't simply random facts. They point to potential harm to a significant portion of the state's natural resources. Mercury causes neurological damage, PBCs cause immunological harm, flame retardants can affect the hormone levels, organ function and development of birds, industrial stain and water repellants can compromise birds' reproductive capacity and banned pesticides that are still showing up in eggs can cause shell thinning as well as reproductive harm.

Where do the contaminants come from? Goodale and his colleagues believe global sources deliver the contaminants to Maine in the rain and snow that falls on the state.

But there are local sources as well, he says.

"They can be coming from our homes. Flame retardants, PFCs are present there in the dust," he says, "and potentially being literally tracked out of our house when we walk out."

Household products such as shower curtains, TVs and stereos, children's toys, carpets, upholstery fabric and even the ubiquitous plastic water bottle can leach the contaminants and when thrown away and incinerated can also release the toxins.

And lest we think that birds are the only victims of these chemicals, think again.

Last year, 13 Mainers tested their bodies for evidence of toxic contaminants. The project's principal investigators were scientists from Harvard and the University of Southern Maine and their conclusions were alarming: like Maine's birds, the subject's bodies were filled with a soup of toxic chemicals.

Rep. Hannah Pingree, D-North Haven, was one of the subjects tested. She had the second highest level of mercury of the group. That experience led her to introduce a bill into this session of the Legislature which, when paired with a similar bill proposed by Gov. John Baldacci, would require manufacturers to declare which toxic chemicals are in the consumer products they offer.

The state ultimately could ban products containing those chemicals.

While lawmakers have in past years voted to ban individual compounds, these bills would require a more comprehensive approach to the problem of toxic contamination of both Mainers and their environment.

The legislation is opposed by the chemical industry, which says that the federal level is where such action should take place. But the feds have been notoriously lax in regulating environmental toxins.

In the face of mounting evidence that toxic chemicals are getting into our bodies without our permission and are poisoning our state's wildlife, the bills before the Legislature make sense. Chemical manufacturers complain of the undue burden it would place on them -- but really, the undue, and undeserved, burden is being placed on all of us, birds as well as humans.