

Mysterious Eagle Mortality
SCWDS Briefs, April 1995, 11.1

State and federal wildlife officials have been investigating mortality of bald eagles at DeGray Lake near Arkadelphia, Arkansas, about 65 miles southwest of Little Rock. Mortality was first detected in late November 1994 and by the end of December, 23 sick or dead birds were recovered. An additional six dead eagles have been found since then. Most birds were picked up along a 3-mile section of shoreline. Carcasses were submitted to laboratories of the Arkansas Livestock and Poultry Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensics Laboratory in Ashland, Oregon, and the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wisconsin.

Three eagles were collected alive and taken to wildlife rehabilitators. All of these birds subsequently died. Clinical signs included seizures, tremors, and difficulty flying or landing. Postmortem examinations have not provided a cause of death, and field investigations conducted at the lake did not yield any promising clues. To date, an exhaustive list of potential agents has been evaluated; most have been eliminated as factors in the demise of the birds. Infectious diseases have been ruled out. Testing has ruled out many toxins responsible for eagle mortality in the past, however, continuing efforts are being directed toward other toxins that might cause compatible signs and lesions.

Subsequent to the Arkansas outbreak, 11 bald eagles were found sick or dead in Sauk and Columbia counties, Wisconsin, from early January 1995 through mid-February 1995. The clinical signs and gross and microscopic lesions were quite different from the signs and lesions observed in the Arkansas eagles, and no direct link has been made between the mortality events. Exhaustive field and diagnostic efforts have not identified the cause of the Wisconsin eagle mortality either. Tests for toxic agents and infectious diseases are in progress. The National Wildlife Health Center is now coordinating the investigation of both die-offs. Persons who encounter sick or dead eagles should notify their state fish and wildlife agency immediately in order to initiate an investigation.