

# Weight & Switch:

A Massachusetts teenager educates anglers about the unforeseen consequences from lead fishing weights.



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Most people who have gone fishing have a story about “the one that got away.” Such tales prompted Boy Scout Michael Browne to wonder: What happens to lead fishing gear when a fish gets away—hook, line, and sinker?

Michael looked into the matter and found that even careful anglers lose, on average, one fishing weight every six hours. When the tiny lead weights used by freshwater fishers all across the country end up in the water—or inside a fish—they can cause suffering for birds that feed in ponds, lakes, and streams.

Determined to tackle the issue, Michael set out to educate anglers about the dangers of using lead weights. In addition to helping waterbirds, Michael’s outreach allowed him to reel in his Eagle Scout rank and many other awards along the way.

## NOT FOR THE BIRDS

Waterbirds like swans and loons, an endangered species, ingest pebbles and small rocks on purpose. Once in their digestive tract, the stones help the birds grind and digest the plants they eat. The problem is: Lead sinkers at the bottom of a body of water look a lot like rocks. “After the sinkers have been there for even a few days you really can’t tell them apart from other pebbles lying around them,” says Michael. It’s only a matter of time before waterbirds swallow them.

Barnett Rattner is an ecotoxicologist at the USGS-Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland. He studies toxins, or poisons, in the environment. Rattner explains that lead is a toxic heavy metal that disrupts many organ systems in humans and other animals.



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Michael Browne created a Web site to help other people start lead-replacement programs. Check it out at: [www.replacelead.com](http://www.replacelead.com)

Birds that swallow a lead sinker soon have trouble digesting food, dealing with cold weather, and avoiding predators due to muscle spasms and loss of balance that make them easy targets. Within two weeks of lead poisoning, many birds will die. Studies have shown that lead poisoning kills up to 32 percent of trumpeter swans and 52 percent of loons.

### A SIMPLE SOLUTION



With a \$500 grant from the Toxic Use Reduction Institute in Massachusetts, Michael constructed 800 sample packages of lead-free fishing weights. Then, he and his fellow Boy Scouts set out to convince anglers at local fishing derbies to trade in their lead weights for safer ones made of materials such as tin, ceramic, or steel.

So far, Michael has collected nearly 63 pounds of lead from fishers. That means he has kept 8,000 to 10,000 lead fishing weights out of the ecosystem.

Michael is hopeful that lead weights will soon be a thing of the past. “If consumers were to just stop buying lead weights, companies would naturally scale back their lead-weight production,” he says.