The Dangers of Rodenticides to Raptors, Wildlife, and Humans

Rodenticides, commonly used to control rodent populations, pose a significant threat to non-targeted species including raptors (birds of prey), other wildlife, and humans. These chemical poisons, particularly second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs), have widespread environmental impacts that ripple through ecosystems.

Raptors such as owls, hawks, and eagles are severely affected by rodenticides. These birds of prey play a vital role in natural rodent control, as rodents are their prey. However, when they consume rodents that have ingested rodenticides, they too become poisoned. Rodents can live up to 5 days after ingesting poison, making them easier for raptors to catch. Raptors that consume multiple poisoned prey accumulate high levels of these toxins in their bodies, they do not die immediately but suffer from prolonged exposure. SGARs inhibit the blood's ability to clot, causing internal bleeding that can take days before the victim succumbs to its lethal effects.

In recent years, researchers have documented an alarming number of raptors sickened and killed by SGARS. Veterinarians at the New England Wildlife Centers report treating hundreds of poisoned raptors, foxes, and coyotes each year.

A study by Tufts Wildlife Clinic at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine showed that 100% of Red-tailed Hawks admitted to their clinic tested positive for rodenticides (SGARs), in their organs. While many of these birds died from other causes like collisions with vehicles, exposure to rodenticides plays a role as they reduce an animal's overall health, making it susceptible to hazards.

In addition to birds of prey, rodenticides harm non-target wildlife, including scavengers, predators, and even herbivores. Animals like foxes, coyotes and bobcats often consume poisoned rodents or carrion and suffer from secondary poisoning. Smaller predators and omnivores such as raccoons and skunks are similarly affected. Additionally, some rodenticides, particularly those used in pellet form, may be mistaking for food and ingested by animals such as our pets.

Rodenticides also pose risks to human health, particularly to children who might accidentally ingest them. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), thousands of children are exposed to rodenticides each year, often requiring emergency medical treatment. In 2023, there were 5,426 cases of rodenticide poisoning in the United States involving a child aged 5 years or younger. Ingesting even small amounts can lead to severe symptoms, including internal bleeding, kidney damage, or in rare cases, death.

Residue from rodenticides can contaminate soil, water, and food supplies. Agricultural workers, pest control personnel, and residents in urban areas may be inadvertently exposed. Long-term exposure has been linked to various health issues, including cancer, reproductive harm, and developmental disorders.

Given the significant risks, many experts advocate for the use of safer alternatives to rodenticides. Integrated pest management (IPM) strategies focus on prevention through sanitation, exclusion (sealing entry points), and promoting natural predators like raptors. Some communities have even installed owl boxes to encourage natural rodent control, reducing the need for poisons.

Another option for controlling rodent populations is through rodent contraceptives. Studies have shown the use of contraceptives can be successful in reducing the size of rodent populations. Currently, two Connecticut cities are using contraceptives instead of rodenticides.

In April of 2022, the city of Hartford began using ContraPest a brand of rat birth control in Bushnell Park with positive results. In March of 2025, Fairfield has begun their own pilot program for using rodent contraceptives.

Rodenticides may seem to offer a quick fix for rodent problems, but their broader ecological consequences are deeply harmful. They disrupt ecosystems by poisoning raptors, other wildlife, endanger human health, and often exacerbate the problems they aim to solve. Sustainable and ecologically sound pest control methods are essential to safeguard our environment and public health.

In conclusion raptors are the natural answer to controlling rodent populations so let’s choose to protect our birds of prey, other animals and our children from rodenticides.

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