



BRI Contact: Chris DeSorbo
Phone: (207) 839-7600, ext.115
Email: chris.desorbo@briloon.org

TNC Contact: Ellen Weiss
Phone: (914) 244-3271, ext. 21
Email: eweiss@tnc.org

Report Reveals High Levels of Mercury in Bald Eagles in New York State

Study indicates mercury occurs at potentially harmful levels in eagles in New York's Catskill Region and Catskill Park.

ALBANY, NEW YORK — November 25, 2008 — Mercury concentrations in adult and juvenile bald eagles are elevated within New York's Catskill Region according to a report prepared by the BioDiversity Research Institute (BRI) of Gorham, ME, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation with support from The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

One-in-four bald eagle chicks in the Catskill Region had accumulated mercury from their recent diet (fish), and one-in-three adults had accumulated mercury over their lifetimes, to levels that are known to have negative effects in other birds such as common loons.

Mercury becomes an air pollutant largely through releases from coal-fired power plants, solid waste incinerators, and various smokestack industries. Airborne mercury eventually returns to earth in rain, snow, and fog droplets as well as in dry form. Under the right conditions, mercury is then transformed into methyl-mercury, which becomes magnified toward the top of the food web. Its toxic effects can include both neurological and reproductive harm to wildlife, and to people who consume contaminated wildlife.

“The average mercury level for eagle chicks in the Catskill Region – and especially those near the boundary of the Catskill Park – was comparable to levels found in regions associated with significant mercury pollution histories,” reports Chris DeSorbo, lead investigator of the study and Director of BRI's Raptor Program.

These findings are consistent with previous research revealing that the Catskill Region in southern New York receives some of the highest rates of atmospheric deposition of mercury in the U.S. Fish and wildlife in this region are regularly exposed to mercury through their diet at levels that are of concern to scientists. The recent study, initiated by a grant from TNC and executed by NYSDEC and BRI, is the first to comprehensively examine mercury exposure in New York's bald eagles in general and in the Catskill Region in particular.

“The good news” continued DeSorbo, “is that no eagle chicks sampled in New York outside the Catskill Region had mercury levels of concern.”

Dr. David Braun, Director of Conservation Science for TNC's Eastern New York Chapter, explains, “Research over the past few years has documented a tendency for mercury from air pollution to accumulate to harmful levels in wildlife in ‘hotspots,’ where environmental factors

combine to move mercury more readily into forest and aquatic food webs. The Catskills appear to be one such hotspot.”

By the early 1970s, breeding bald eagles had nearly vanished from New York State and surrounding regions due to the combined impacts of DDT, habitat loss, and direct killing. Legal protections for eagles, their habitats, and the 1972 ban on DDT eventually led to widespread population recoveries throughout much of the continental U.S. Bald eagle populations have made a strong comeback in New York following intensive restoration efforts led by Peter Nye, leader of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation’s (NYSDEC) Endangered Species Unit.

Initiated by a grant from TNC, BRI and NYSDEC researchers teamed up to determine whether biologists should be concerned about mercury levels in bald eagles from the Catskill Region or elsewhere in New York State. Biologists collected 102 samples from bald eagle chicks and/or adults at 41 nests throughout the state and analyzed them for mercury.

Findings from this study have been recently released in the form of a full report now available at BRI and TNC websites listed below. A 2-page fact sheet highlighting the study results is also available on both websites.

A report released earlier this year by The Nature Conservancy and the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, *Threats From Above: Air Pollution Impacts on Ecosystems and Biological Diversity in the Eastern United States*, found that no ecosystem in the eastern United States is free of the effects of air pollution. To view the full report, visit [http://www.ecostudies.org/Threats from Above.pdf](http://www.ecostudies.org/Threats_from_Above.pdf).

The Nature Conservancy is the leading conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people, protecting more than 117 million acres of land and 5,000 miles of river worldwide. The Eastern New York Chapter (ENY), the Conservancy’s first chapter, owns and manages 43 nature preserves, encompassing over 15,000 acres. ENY works across eight landscape-scale sites from the Catskills to the Berkshires and from the Hudson River to the shores of Lake Champlain. To learn more, visit www.nature.org/eny.

BioDiversity Research Institute (BRI) is a nonprofit organization located in Gorham, Maine. Founded in 1998, BRI is dedicated to progressive environmental research and education that furthers local, regional and global sustainability and conservation policies. BRI’s research efforts emphasize conservation biology issues in New England and across North and Central America. www.BRIloon.org

Also available for interviews:

David Braun, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Conservation Science

Alan White, The Nature Conservancy, Director of the Conservancy’s Catskills conservation project

Dr. David Evers, BioDiversity Research Institute, Wildlife Mercury specialist

Peter Nye, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Endangered Species Unit Leader

Jefferey Loukmas, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Fisheries and Mercury Specialist