



This article was published in the VC Star as an Op Ed on Jan 16, 2021 - [link](#)

Bird abuse in a time of pandemic

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Since ancient times, birds of prey have been revered as symbols of strength and power. The American bald eagle is on the currency of the United States, and eagles and other raptors have inspired naming everything from athletic teams to warplanes. Who could even think of harming one of these fierce, beautiful creatures?

Apparently, there are people who will, as we saw in November with the shooting of a great horned owl in Santa Paula. Thanks to an alert citizen, local police and the Santa Paula Animal Rescue Center, the female bird was transported to Ojai Raptor Center where she was treated for wing wounds and lead poisoning before being released back into the wild on Jan. 2.

Patient #1181 had been shot three times, and sadly she was not the raptor facility's only shooting victim this year. Hawks and vultures have also been targeted. And the problem isn't just local. Bird killing and abuse is an issue of local, state and national concern. In 2019, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported that even critically endangered California condors have been shot over a 27-year period. Condors are a high-profile species that conservationists have worked hard to bring back from the verge of extinction. These shootings occurred even though such acts can carry federal fines of as much as \$100,000 as well as prison time.

While great horned owls and most other raptors are not endangered, it is still illegal to shoot or harm them and violators can be prosecuted and fined under federal or state statutes. There may be rewards for information leading to a conviction. Citizens can make confidential reports through the CalTIP hotline at 1-888-334-2258.

According to Capt. Patrick Foy with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's law enforcement division, the only birds that are legal to hunt in the state of California are game birds, and restrictions apply as to when and how those can be taken. For example, hunters may only be able to shoot a single pintail duck during hunting season out of a daily limit of seven ducks. Click "Hunting" at wildlife.ca.gov to learn the rules for various species. Foy said that unless a bird is specifically authorized to hunt, "everything else is protected by California or federal law."

Besides being illegal, shooting birds of prey deprives farms, ranches and residential communities of free pest control as well as carcass disposal. Hawks, eagles, falcons, owls and other raptors keep down the rodent population, and vultures, including condors, keep the landscape clean.

Ventura Audubon Society

The logo for the Ventura Audubon Society features a stylized illustration of a bird, possibly a condor or a similar large raptor, in flight. The bird is shown from a side profile, with its wings fully extended upwards and outwards. It has a dark body with a lighter patch on its neck and a small red detail on its head. The bird is positioned centrally, overlapping the text of the organization's name.

The tragedy of shooting one is compounded when the hunter uses lead ammunition. Lead bullets fragment on impact, leaving tiny bits of lead in the bird's flesh. If another bird or mammal, including humans, consumes the dead bird, things get even worse. If lead gets into the bloodstream through the digestive process, it can impair the ability to think. If doses are large enough, it can be lethal. Foy noted that it has been illegal to use lead bullets to hunt waterfowl since the 1990s. The state prohibited lead ammunition in areas where condors might exist in 2008, and then banned it for all hunting in 2019.

2020 was a maddening, depressing, frustrating year, but the owl incident and the subsequent discovery of a brown pelican with slash wounds at Ventura Harbor show a shocking lack of compassion that can be seen in other ways as well.

Ventura Audubon monitors the endangered Western snowy plovers nesting on our local beaches from April through September each year. This year, one of our sites came close to being destroyed by joy riders in all-terrain vehicles. We are also encountering more dog owners who are unwilling to share the beach. While some locales have separate beaches for people with dogs, Ventura County has none. There are different laws for each city and people take advantage. They refuse to restrict their dogs to the beaches where leashed dogs are permitted and also let them roam on state beaches where dogs are not allowed at all.

The pandemic has worsened this problem since people have so few places to go for recreation. Understood, but the birds still need our help and we need them.

Birds serve as inspiration to us, and for an encore kill pesky rodents and yucky bugs. Representatives of their kind somehow survived the mass extinction event that ended most of the life on earth. Watching these living dinosaurs gives humans the hope in spite of everything, life can go on. Birds are good medicine in a time of pandemic.