

## ***Unleaded shooting: hunters like copper bullets***

***Kevin Howe***

In their hearts, all hunters come from Missouri. You've got to show 'em. A morning and afternoon of shooting unleaded hunting bullets Sunday at the Swiss Rifle Club east of Gonzales showed 'em. Copper bullets by Barnes were shot against conventional, unbonded jacketed lead bullets and came out a winner in terms of cohesion, expansion and accuracy. The shoot was part of an effort by a consortium of game officials, wildlife conservationists and hunter organizations to try to eliminate bullets as a source of lead poisoning of the California Condor. The non-lead ammunition was provided free by manufacturers Federal Premium Ammunition, Bismuth Cartridge Co. and Barnes Bullets to let hunters see if they worked. They did. Shot groups fired with the Barnes copper hollow point Triple Shock X-Bullet were generally tighter than with conventional softpoint bullets. A test firing of the two types of bullets into plastic bins filled with wet newspaper and telephone books showed the Barnes projectiles were recovered with uniform "petaling" expansion, while in every case where jacketed lead ammo was used, the lead separated from the copper jacket and fragmented. Admittedly, these were the cheaper, commonly used softpoint bullets, said Blake McCann, wildlife biologist for the Institute for Wildlife Studies in Hollister. There are more expensive "bonded" lead bullets or compartmentalized bullets that hold together, but even they, he said, will scatter some lead on impact. McCann

has used the Barnes bullets extensively for eradicating destructive wild pigs that invade sensitive habitat with good success, he said. "We've had the most experience with pigs," his wife, Amy McCann, said. "They definitely work with pigs." "If you can kill a wild pig with it," said Terry Palmisano, senior wildlife biologist for the state Department of Fish and Game, "you can kill just about anything." Non-lead hunting ammunition is more expensive than conventional – up to eight times the cost, said McCann. The Institute for Wildlife Studies would like to see a California non-lead ammunition rebate program similar to Arizona's to encourage hunters to buy and use it. Participants brought their own rifles and lead bullet ammunition for comparison shooting, and got ten rounds of non-lead ammunition to try out at 100-yard paper targets. Lead bullets and fragments in carcasses eaten by condors had been labeled a major source of lead poisoning for the endangered birds, and that assertion was confirmed in August by scientists at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who published a study online in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology* that looked at lead from rifle bullets and shotgun pellets. The UC-Santa Cruz researchers used a "fingerprinting" technique based on the unique isotope ratios found in different sources of lead. The technique enabled them to match the lead in blood samples from condors to the lead in ammunition. The Ventana Wildlife Society, a sponsor

of the event, had a tri-tip barbecue served up by Mansmith's Barbecue. The society has been releasing condors into the wild on the Big Sur Coast since 1996. The California Condor was declared endangered by the federal government in 1967 and by the state in 1971. In 1987, the last 22 wild condors were trapped and taken to zoos for a captive breeding program that raised the condor population back up to just under 300. There are 135 condors flying freely throughout the south-western United States, said Kelly Sorenson, Ventana executive director, and all are at risk of lead poisoning. The state Department of Fish and Game's current hunting regulations urge hunters in condor ranges to use unleaded ammunition, or pick out bullets and fragments from gut piles or other carrion left in the field, or bury it, using the slogan, "Get the lead out." The shoot drew a group of approximately 50 hunters, and brought some non-hunting naturalists into contact with sport hunters for the first time. Cathy Keeran, executive associate with the Ventana Wildlife Society, was one. She collected donations from the chow line and the hunters were happy to pony up to offset the cost of the barbecue. "We're here to inform them about what's available." Mary Kotschwar, a student intern who graduated from the University of Puget Sound with a bachelor of science degree in biology, who has been working with the National Park Service's condor recovery project at the Pinnacles National Monument, was another. "We come in contact with many

landowners," she said. "This is a good group." Kotschwar said she hopes to pursue a graduate degree, and her focus with the condor project is studying the social behavior of condors. Palmisano conducts hunting classes for groups, including a women's pheasant hunt for beginners. "If they don't become die-hard hunters," she said, "I don't care." She wants people to become familiar with hunting, guns, their proper uses, and "not to be afraid of them." The unleaded ammunition "shot nice," said Robert Trotter of Gilroy, who came down with a hunting buddy who had heard about the event in a hunters' magazine and tried out the .223 Remington ammunition made by Bismuth. "I'll try it and see how it works in the field." Swiss Rifle Club member Leonard De Bord of Prunedale ran his sample ammunition through an M-1 Garand service rifle. "I thought it compared to regular bullets," he said. "They got in the black, and that's good enough for me." The club range, tucked into a small valley in the Gabilan foothills, was originally founded by Swiss ranchers to stay proficient with their required shooting proficiency as Swiss citizens, said club rangemaster Norm Seidel of Carmel Valley. Associate memberships are available, he said, but associates don't get a vote in how the club is run. Other exhibitors at the event included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service, the California Rifle and Pistol Association and the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers Institute Inc.

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