



For every recorded incident of poisoning, the National Game Bird Survey says, an estimated five incidents go unrecorded and unnoticed by the landowner. These ducks were a small number of those killed in a mass poisoning incident this July in the Randfontein district. This was filmed by the 50/50 TV programme after reports by the local veterinarian Dr HJ Naude.

## ESCALATING POISONING CRISIS PROMPTS CALL FOR A SECURITY INVESTIGATION

The incidence of poisoning of game birds in South Africa is continuing to increase and has already exceeded crisis proportions. According to the Game Bird Survey conducted each year by Dr Slang Viljoen for the National Game Bird Federation (NGF), poisoning incidents have occurred on one out of every five farms in South Africa! 'Our surveys indicate that there are many more incidents, possibly as high as five times as many as those the landowner may be aware of,' Dr Viljoen said.

This disclosure comes on the heels of yet another poisoning incident in which large numbers of waterfowl, including white-faced whistling duck, yellow-billed duck and red-billed duck, were poisoned in the Randfontein district near Johannesburg. 'During the past decade, repeated incidents such as this were reported, in which hundreds of eagles, falcons, hawks, game birds and many small mammals were deliberately poisoned, including endangered vultures, said Dr Viljoen. 'There is grave concern for the future of our eagles, blue cranes, vultures and owls. At a game bird symposium organised two years ago by the NGF, a researcher disclosed that two elephants had even been poisoned.'

In 1999, the NGF appealed in a registered letter to the Registrar: Act 36 of 1947, Mr Etienne Wolmarans, of the national Department of Agriculture, to take urgent action. He attended a meeting of the NGF executive in which exhaustive accounts of the problem, which was 'becoming an epidemic', were presented to him. He was told of the emerging practice of buying deadly carbamate insecticides in bulk and then selling re-packed 5g sachets at taxi ranks for use as general poison. According to Mr David Tweddell, Chairman of the NGF, nothing has been done since. 'We are not aware of any response on the part of Mr Wolmarans and his staff, such as enforcing the law regulating the safekeeping and sale of poisons by agricultural co-ops,' he said. 'We have not been informed of any action whatsoever, they have not contacted us again or made any attempt, through the NGF, to monitor the situation. There's no need for new laws, they just have to enforce the current one.'

The conservation community is equally silent. Action by provincial conservation authorities only took place when incidents were specifically brought to their attention. Despite the participation of the provinces in the NGF, there has been no

### DEADLY POISONS

Dr Neil Fourie (Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Institute) reported in 1996 on a survey of poisoning outbreaks over a period of 7 years. No less than 370 incidents of poisoning of wildlife were investigated! These were outbreaks in which **50 or 100 or more birds were killed!** In 166 of the outbreaks a definite diagnosis was made, and in 82,5% of the cases synthetic organic pesticides were used. More than 90% of the poisonings were intentional.

The poisons currently used are so deadly (one substance is 16 times more poisonous than strychnine!) that the bird is killed even before the meat can become tainted. The poisoners remove the intestines of the birds before cooking the meat.

Monocrotophos is an organo-phosphate. It is in the same class of compounds as the dreaded chemical warfare agent Sarin. There are several safer alternatives to monocrotophos available, but they cost more and are presumably less profitable.

Fenthion, which is used to kill red-billed finches, is 20 times more lethal to raptors (LD50 1mg/kg) than finches (LD50 23mg/kg).

The carbamate Aldicarb, which is widely sold at taxi-ranks and known as 'Two-step', is so deadly that a quarter of a teaspoon can kill a grown man! △

attempt to address the problem pro-actively, or to involve the stakeholders in the game bird industry.

Apart from press releases issued by Dr Gerhard Verdoorn, chairman of the Poison Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, no pressure has been put on the pesticide industry nor on the agricultural industry to get their house in order. 'Instead, the Group is apparently more concerned about the so-called lead poisoning of wild birds due to shotgun pellets — despite the fact that there is no scientific evidence to support such allegations,' Mr. Tweddell said. According to the well-known biologist and founder of the NGF, Dr Slang Viljoen, attempts have been made to discuss these issues with Dr Verdoorn. 'We invited him to the last Game Bird Symposium,' Dr Viljoen said, 'but he did not attend and instead sent a junior researcher. The reports of lead poisoning in the USA have been exposed as pseudo-science and this subject is counter-productive because it is focusing on the wrong issues.'

'Meanwhile, the poisoning of wild animals and birds is escalating into a national disaster in conservation terms. It only needs an incident of large-scale poisoning of people to turn it into a national disaster in human terms.'

The NGF is at a loss to explain the apathy. 'We cannot explain or understand why no action is being taken to address the crisis,' said Mr Tweddell. 'The authorities are aware of the crisis yet no action is being taken.'

'Deadly poisons can be bought in bulk at retail level in agricultural co-ops, no questions asked. At the same time there is no control over the safe-keeping by farmers of such poisons.'

'In the light of the new global wave of violence and terrorism, we are asking for an urgent security enquiry into this state of affairs. It's a ticking time bomb!'  $\Delta$



PHOTOS FROM ARCHIVES (THABAZIMBI POISONING 1995, SPRINGBOK FLATS 1998, ETC...)