

MYSTERIOUS ANIMAL DEATHS



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

You decide to wander down to the neighborhood tavern to have a couple glasses of man's best friend. Unfortunately, you stayed a little longer than planned.

The "last call" was probably the drink you should not have had, but you are a sport and put it away. On the long walk home, you suddenly have hundreds of birds falling from the sky, landing on the ground deader than tax reform. You are not sure if it is imaginary, because of that "last call," or if it is the beginning of the apocalypse.

The incident would be enough to make you think you stumbled into the Twilight Zone, or a remake of the Alfred Hitchcock classic, *The Birds*. But it actually did happen one morning in Wales, near the villages of Hazelbeach and Pembrokeshire, as hundreds, and maybe thousands, of starlings mysteriously fell to the ground dead.

During the first wave, citizens told the town council they collected 10 bin bags off the road of dead birds, estimating over a thousand birds collected. The incident was reported to the Animal and Plant Health Agency for investigation, but no cause has yet been determined.

Mysterious animal deaths seem to be a rare occurrence, but they can be mind boggling. Take for example an incident in Arkansas where 5,000 red-winged blackbirds suddenly died. The official report from the autopsies listed the cause of death as blunt trauma.

There was massive internal bleeding near the breast, consistent with a violent collision.

Blackbirds are known to have terrible eyesight, and also fly in tight formation to save energy. If the lead bird becomes disoriented due to a thunderstorm, lightning,



Animals leave evidence in the woods that we rarely see, even when they die off in large numbers. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

or even a downdraft or microburst, it can plow into a building taking the entire flock with it. That is one theory.

These events really do happen frequently, but we are just unaware of them. The United States Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center reported that over an eight-month period, 95 mass wildlife die-offs occurred in North America, and that is probably an undercount.

The survey included 900 turkey vultures that seemed to drown and starve in the Florida Keys, 4,300 ducks killed by parasites in Minnesota, 1,500 salamanders who were done in by a virus in Idaho, 2,000 bats that died of rabies in Texas, and the mysterious death of 2,720 sea birds in California. On average, 163 such deaths are reported to the federal government each year, according to USGS records.

There have been much larger die-offs than those mentioned above. Twice during the summer of 1996, more than 100,000 ducks died of botulism in Canada. Chronic wasting disease and several other diseases have killed thousands of whitetail deer across the United States. Sometimes an outbreak will kill all the deer in a county.

The Gulf Coast of Florida can be plagued with red tides, sometimes called

harmful algal blooms (HABs). These occur when microscopic algae multiply to higher-than-normal concentrations, often discoloring the water. More than 50 HAB species occur in the Gulf, but the red tide organism is the most well-known. In 2021, more than 790 tons of dead fish had washed up on the beaches of Florida in the Tampa area alone.

The majority of the mass die-offs can be attributed to a disease that can be spread through the sharing of a common watering hole, especially during drought years where animals congregate at the few water holes that have not dried up.

Most die-offs can be blamed on toxic chemicals, pathogens and diseases, or trauma. Conspiracy theories are running rampant for the unexplained deaths. Theories have included the deaths were a result of UFOs, government tests, secret weapons, and communist plots.

One theory is suicide. Mass suicides are actually not uncommon in the animal kingdom. Take for example the lemmings. Thousands of them will commit suicide by walking over a cliff, following their leader. Perhaps we need to set up a hotline and peer group for the animals that might be feeling like killing themselves.

Officials with the Idaho Fish and Game discovered a

bizarre situation when they stumbled upon a massive pile of remains, from what they called an "elk bone-yard," near Lewiston at Craig Mountain.

According to Northwest Sportsman they were led to the location via a mortality signal from a radio-collared elk. Needless to say, they were shocked when they discovered the grisly scene.

Senior wildlife technician Mark Shepard had this to say, "With scree material and boulders up to the size of beach balls, it appeared that at least 15 elk were traversing and side hilling near the top of a ridgeline only to be caught up in a landslide.

Bringing them down almost 1,000 feet over just a distance of 300-400 yards, this group of elk was caught up in rubble and snow ultimately resulting in death."

People die in avalanches and landslides every year while traversing the back country so it is only plausible that animals can meet up with the same fate. Most of these slides occur without being observed, and in most cases, we will never know it happened. In this case, the discovery was made because of the collar.

Collars are often placed on animals by game departments across the country. Some of these collars will provide information over a span of months, and even years, of the movement, migration, and other natural

events that can influence their population.

In over six decades of clomping around in the back country I have never come across a mass die-off of animals. I have experienced several red tide blooms during my years in Florida, and those are devastating on the local fish populations.

The 2021 bloom was so bad, much of the coastline of Southwest Florida has been closed to sport fishing, and some of it is still closed, all in an attempt to bring back the populations of game fish.

These die-offs are usually caused by disease and can be explained. It is the ones that remain unsolved that get the conspiracy theorists all wound up. When I think about it, I kind of like the whole UFO stuff. Remember the crop circles?

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Spring Creek road and area closure implemented during bridge reconstruction

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests' Gunnison Ranger District announce the reconstruction of the Spring Creek Bridges #3 and #4. These bridges make passage through the Spring Creek Canyon possible via the National Forest

System Road (NFSR) #744—Spring Creek road.

Routine inspections revealed structural deficiencies in the two bridges, last reconstructed in 1982 (#3) and 1964 (#4). The Gunnison Ranger District is taking proactive measures to reconstruct the bridges and ensure long-term road safety. Reconstruction began Aug. 5.

To ensure public safety and protect construction workers, NFSR #744—Spring Creek road will be temporarily closed to all traffic during the bridge reconstruction. The closure will be in effect from mile markers 4.5 to 6, from the intersection of NFSR #744—Spring Creek road and County Road #744.

Please adhere to the construc-

tion closure area and follow all signage. The NFSR #748—Rocky Brook road provides access to the Spring Creek Reservoir and trails on the northern side of the closure area. Access to intersecting trails and roads across NFSR #744—Spring Creek road will remain open. All access through the Spring Creek Canyon at the project area will be closed.

"We're taking proactive measures to rebuild these bridges to ensure safe passage for many decades," said Dayle Funka, Gunnison District Ranger. "The safety and well-being of our community and visitors is our main focus."

For more information, contact the Gunnison Ranger District at 970-641-0471.

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