



“This is not okay.”

FWP teams up with Teton Raptor Center to prevent birds from dying a slow, horrific death in outhouses at state parks and fishing access sites across Montana.

BY KELSEY DAYTON

It's a nightmarish way for anything to die: trapped in darkness, covered by human excrement.

Amy McCarthy, executive director of Teton Raptor Center in Jackson, Wyoming, knew that birds get stuck in open drain pipes, unable to climb the smooth walls or spread their wings to fly out. And she could imagine, with a cringe and a gag, the fate of birds that found themselves burrowing into not just any pipes, but those leading to the bottom of vault toilets.

She'd heard stories of people entering an outhouse and looking down to find two glowing eyes staring back up. But she didn't fully comprehend the horror of a

bird dying in such a place until she saw a picture of a pathetic-looking boreal owl in Idaho, surrounded by piles of human waste, peering up through a vault latrine toilet seat opening.

It was 2010, and McCarthy had worked at the raptor center for only a few months. The U.S. Forest Service was circulating the picture to raise awareness of the problem. “My first thoughts were ‘This little owl is *where? Why?*’” McCarthy says. “And then I thought, ‘This is not okay.’”

McCarthy decided to do something about it. Within a year, the raptor center launched the Poo-Poo Project to protect birds by installing screens over pipes leading into vault toilets. McCarthy started with outhouses on nearby national forests using

NO WAY OUT Above: Birds that enter pit latrines via ventilation pipes can't escape. Top: A northern saw-whet owl rescued from an outhouse. Sadly, many trapped birds are never discovered.



TOP TO BOTTOM: DIANE DIEBOLD/TETON RAPTOR CENTER; SHUTTERSTOCK

fabricated rock screens designed to catch stones that kids sometimes try to throw into pipes. But at \$100 each, the screens were expensive. They were also complicated to install and blocked ventilation if snow accumulated on top. “That’s when we went into innovation mode and created the Poo-Poo Screen,” McCarthy says.

In 2013, Teton Raptor Center debuted a screen specially designed to fit on the pipe openings of vault toilets. The screens have since been installed in thousands of outhouses, in all 50 states, including more than 1,300 in Montana. The raptor center has partnered with roughly 375 groups and agencies, including Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and Audubon chapters. So far, the raptor center has sold more than 11,000 screens.

Missoula Concrete Construction bought several hundred screens to install on its vault toilets. “By purchasing the screens from the center rather than making them ourselves, we’re saving birds at the vault toilets we sell and also helping the raptor center with its other bird conservation

work,” says Adam Bauer, a co-owner of the company.

The screens attach to a small stand that goes over the pipe, leaving a small gap between the screen and opening. That allows air to flow into the outhouse even if snow covers the screen, says David Watson, Teton Raptor Center development director and Poo-Poo Project manager. Each screen costs \$30, making it affordable for organizations and agencies to buy in bulk or for individuals who want to purchase a single screen and donate it. The raptor center distributes donated screens nationwide where they are most needed.

Watson says civic groups, birding organizations, schools, and scout troops buy the screens as donations and often help install them at city parks, national forest campgrounds, and other public recreation sites.

The ease of installation and relatively low cost prompted FWP to buy screens for vault toilets at dozens of fishing access sites and state parks, including Makoshika, Medicine Rocks, and Brush Lake in eastern Montana. “We immediately recognized it as an important modification we could do to our vault

“This open pipe issue is huge for all kinds of wildlife. And it’s such a simple solution.”



NO ENTRANCE Above: An installed Poo-Poo Screen sits slightly above the exhaust pipe. The design blocks birds while allowing ventilation even if covered in snow. Right: Volunteer Megan Betcher and FWP park maintenance foreman Erik Dion install screens on latrines at Makoshika State Park. FWP has installed screens at state parks and fishing access sites across Montana.





Because the deaths often go unnoticed or unreported, wildlife agencies don't know how many birds die in outhouses.

latrines,” says Tom Shoush, a park ranger at Makoshika. “The whole concept was clearly thought out, a proven benefit to birds, easy to implement, and cost effective.”

Shoush had not known that birds could become trapped in the state park toilets. “It was an issue under our radar until we heard about the Poo-Poo Project,” he says.

Because the deaths often go unnoticed or unreported, FWP and other states’ wildlife agencies don’t know how many birds die in vault latrines annually. But the American Bird Conservancy has estimated that each year across the United States tens of thousands of cavity-nesting birds—woodpeckers, bluebirds, kestrels, and small owls—become trapped in various open metal or PVC pipes used for dryer and roof ventilation, irrigation, fencing, road signage, chimneys, and building construction.

A single irrigation standpipe in California contained the remains of more than 200 birds.

Watson wants the Poo-Poo Project to raise awareness of hazards to birds posed not only by vault latrine pipes but all pipes. “Birds see

the opening and fly in, either to roost or nest, and then they are trapped and die, usually of dehydration,” he says.

The National Audubon Society and American Bird Conservancy are working with the Bureau of Land Management to raise awareness of thousands of open PVC pipes used to mark mining claims across the West. The federal agency now asks mining claimants to replace or cap all open-pipe markers on active mining claims or sites.

The Poo-Poo Project is the only one specifically addressing the outhouse issue. One likely reason for its success is that attaching the screens is both easy and extremely beneficial to birds, says Chris Hammond, an FWP wildlife biologist in Kalispell. After hearing about the project from a colleague, Hammond ordered 75 screens for latrines at state parks and fishing access sites across northwestern Montana.

In central Montana, FWP employees installed screens on 70 vault toilets at fishing

access sites. The screens also keep rocks thrown by vandals from falling down the pipes into the toilets. “Because the companies that pump out the waste don’t want trash or other debris mixed in, we have to send one of our workers down there to fish out the rocks,” says Vicki Robinson, FWP regional Fishing Access Site Program manager in Great Falls. “These screens protect birds and also save us from having to do some real disgusting work.”

Watson hopes people who learn about the dangers of open pipes on pit toilets go home and cover their dryer vent or put a screen on their chimney. “The idea of a bird trapped in a pit toilet really attracts people’s attention,” Watson says. “But a bird being trapped in any type of pipe and slowly dying there is just as horrible. It’s so encouraging to see how many people are recognizing the problem and helping us do something about it.” 🐾

To order Poo-Poo Screens or to make a donation to the program, visit tetonraptorcenter.org or call (307) 203-2551.

NEVER AGAIN A long-eared owl spreads its wings to dry out after being rescued from a vault toilet and cleaned for release. “It was an issue completely under our radar until we heard about the Poo-Poo Project,” says one FWP state park ranger.



Kelsey Dayton is editor of Outdoors Unlimited, the magazine of the Missoula-based Outdoor Writers Association of America. A version of this article originally appeared in Wyoming Wildlife.

LEFT TO RIGHT: TETON RAPTOR CENTER; TETON RAPTOR CENTER; MONTANA FWP; SHUTTERSTOCK; BLM