

# Is it time to ditch balloons?

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 [evergreenaudubon.org/is-it-time-to-ditch-balloons](http://evergreenaudubon.org/is-it-time-to-ditch-balloons)

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July 28, 2019

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Found in the Elk Management Area, July 2019

While out hiking this week, I had an experience that has happened to me countless times through my decades spent in Colorado's most remote mountains. I came across a deflated mylar balloon with a length of attached ribbon. In my opinion, no other waste encountered in pristine wilderness is more offensive, insidious, and garishly out of place.



Bird found tangled with a balloon in Australia (c) Balloons Blow

So, here's what we know about balloons. They are frequently used as part of celebrations, they are at times intentionally released into the air, or occasionally they just get away and float off somewhere on their own, sometimes for hundreds, or even thousands of miles.

Many local businesses (Kroger, Walmart, etc.) generally provide two types of balloons to help create a celebratory atmosphere. Latex balloons are considered biodegradable, though that may take up to four years. Also, the processed latex is covered with preservatives and plasticizers, making it not 100% eco-friendly. Prior to biodegrading, these balloons can attract and be deadly for numerous animals, particularly marine wildlife who see them as possible food items. Also, if string or ribbon is attached to balloons, that can lead to entanglement, injury, illness, asphyxiation, and strangulation. The California Department of Game and Fish reports in an article titled *Floating Menace* (2010) that numerous Bighorn Sheep have died as a result of ingesting latex balloons and their attendant ribbons.



Bighorn Sheep (c) Rebecca Barboza, California Department of Game and Fish

Mylar balloons are made of synthetic nylon with a metallic foil coating; they are not biodegradable, can contribute significantly to oceanic waste, and have been implicated in numerous electrical outages due to their metallic coating and entanglement in power lines (PG&E reported more than 450 Mylar balloon-related outages in 2017). Furthermore, they are ugly as sin, as they persist for decades in our mountains, along our beaches, and elsewhere.

So, I'm probably just preaching to the Evergreen Audubon choir here, but perhaps we can all do our part to help encourage a reduction of balloon use. Some

states, particularly California, have passed laws regulating the sales and use of helium-filled foil balloons due to all the electrical outages, and others (Connecticut, Florida, Tennessee, New York, and Virginia) have legislated against the mass release of all helium-filled balloons because they pose a danger and nuisance to the environment, particularly to wildlife and marine animals. Maybe Colorado could consider this in the next legislative session.

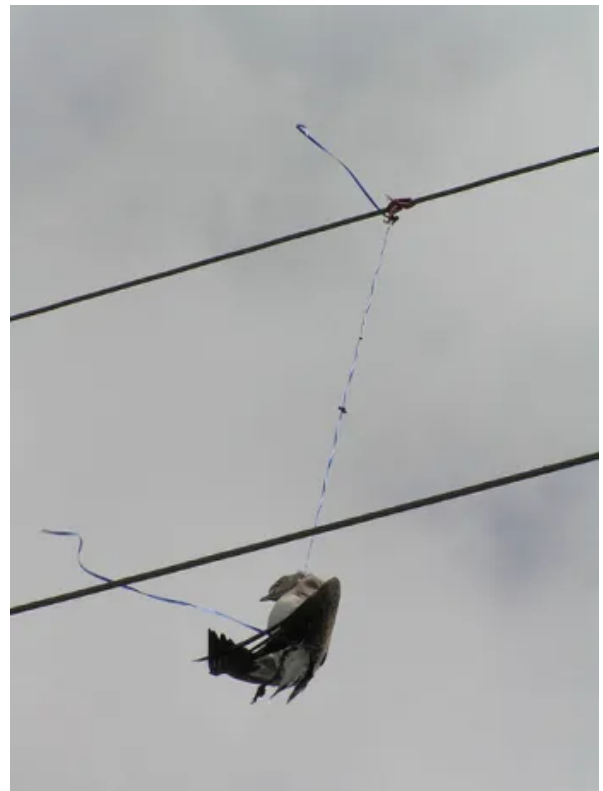


Mylar balloon on California beach (c) John Vonderlin

Finally, everyone can enjoy balloons without risk to wildlife by following some simple suggestions:

- Fill balloons with air instead of helium to reduce the distance they travel.
- Do not release balloons outdoors.
- Attach weights to balloon strings or secure them tightly to solid objects.

- Use natural biodegradable cotton string to tie balloons.
- Dispose of balloons after the celebration with a balloon-popping contest.
- Take the initiative and dispose of balloons wherever they may be found.
- Discourage the practice of displaying or releasing scores of balloons.
- Share this information with others.



Strangled bird (c) Pamela Denmon, USFWS