
BIRD POPULATIONS

FEBRUARY 2002

BACKGROUND

Since 2000, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN) and Manitoba Hydro have been working together in conducting environmental assessments of areas that could be potentially affected by a hydroelectric generating station and other facilities that might be developed at Taskinigup Falls on the Burntwood River, immediately downstream of Wuskwatim Lake. This information pamphlet provides an update on the findings of bird-related studies that have occurred to-date as part of the environmental assessment of this Project.

Why are bird studies being done?

- To determine what species are in areas that might be affected by the Project.
- To determine where birds are and to estimate their numbers.

This information is to be used in assessing how birds will be affected by the proposed Project and how woody debris and other types of habitat are used by birds such as waterfowl.

What birds are being studied?

All groups of birds are considered important to the environment and are being studied, including: waterbirds (ducks, geese, gulls, terns); raptors (e.g., eagles); upland game birds (e.g., grouse); shorebirds (e.g., sandpipers); songbirds (e.g., sparrows and warblers); and other birds (e.g., sandhill cranes and woodpeckers). Special attention is being given to bird that have been identified as having particular importance, such as waterfowl, that are harvested by NCN members.

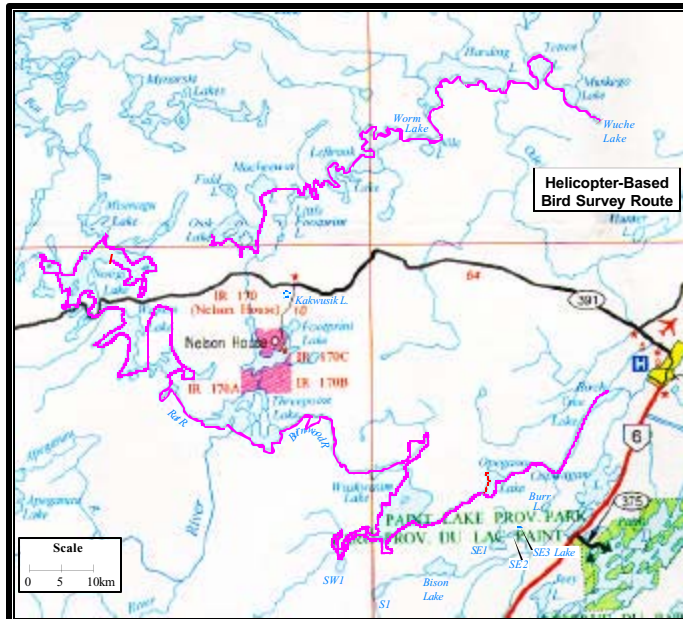
What work has been completed so far?

Birds and their habitat were sampled in 2000 and 2001 using methods outlined below.

Helicopter-based surveys

Six helicopter surveys occurred along the Burntwood River from Birch Tree to Notigi Lake and from Osik to Muskego Lake. Surveys occurred during periods when waterbirds were

migrating in Spring (May/early June), when young waterfowl were present in Summer (July), and during fall migration in September.



Boat-based surveys

Boat-based surveys were designed primarily to determine waterbird and shorebird numbers and distribution. About 1,800 km of shoreline was sampled during 56 surveys conducted in 2000 and 2001 at Opegano, Wuskwatim, Cranberry, Notigi, and Wapisi lakes as well as along reaches of the Burntwood River potentially affected by the Project.

Land-based surveys

Breeding bird surveys were conducted in different habitats at 280 sites to determine the

numbers and species of permanent resident and other breeding birds, as well as amphibians. General reconnaissance occurred in the May to October periods throughout the study area. Information was also collected on plant communities and habitats to assist in better understanding why birds occur in certain areas.

RESULTS OF BIRD STUDIES

No endangered bird species were observed in the study area in 2000 or 2001. The study results from 2000 and 2001 suggest that the Wuskwatim and Opegano lake areas do not provide regionally important breeding or staging areas for waterfowl as compared to other waterbodies outside the Rat-Burntwood River system.

Waterbirds

Waterbird numbers (per kilometre surveyed) were highest in waterbodies outside the Rat and Burntwood River system during all seasons surveyed. Waterfowl comprised most of the birds observed during helicopter and boat-based surveys. Waterfowl were most numerous in the summer and fall at shallow and marshy sites within lakes such as Tetroe, Harding Muskego and little Footprint Lake. Waterfowl were also common in sheltered bays and inlets,

particularly where marshy vegetation or floating peat islands were present. For the Burntwood River, these areas occurred mostly within Cranberry Lake and the southern bays of Wuskwatim Lake. The presence of healthy marshes and riparian zones, the availability of good nesting habitat and changes in water regimes appear to be among the factors most important to birds in the study area. Woody debris was among the habitats used by birds for nesting (e.g., cavity nesting ducks, swallows, and blackbirds), cover, loafing, perching and foraging.



Raptors

Bald Eagles were generally more common near fast water along the Rat-Burntwood river system than along other areas within or outside the river system. Eagles were most numerous in the spring and summer between Opegano and Taskinigup Falls, and were generally spread out throughout the study area in the fall. Other

raptors (e.g., Merlin, American Kestrel, Cooper's and Red-tailed Hawks, owls) occurred in lower numbers than eagles. At least one pair of Osprey nested on Notigi Lake in 2000 and 2001.



Shorebirds

Low numbers of shorebirds and little suitable shorebird habitat was observed within the study area, including areas within and outside the Rat-Burntwood river system. The areas that had the highest number of shorebirds in the spring and summer were between Birch Tree and Wuskwatim Lake and within a southern bay of Wuskwatim Lake. The few shorebird species observed (e.g., Spotted Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Killdeer) are common in the region.

Songbirds

The most common landbird species observed between Early Morning Rapids and Opegano Lake were typical of coniferous dominant mixed woods and edge habitat in the region, e.g., Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Chipping Sparrow, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. The diversity of bird species in forests was highest at the “edge”, namely along rivers and streams.

Other Birds

Other birds that were observed or known to occur in the study area include Tundra Swans, grouse and ptarmigan, rails and Sandhill Cranes, woodpeckers, kingfishers and nighthawks. The survey results suggest that most of these species generally occur in low numbers in the study area.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Field reports are being produced for bird studies conducted in 2000 and 2001. The study results will be summarized in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The study team would like to thank the following NCN members who played an instrumental role in the field studies for the bird component of the environmental assessment: Ron Dysart, Murdo Linklater, Harry Spence, Keith Spence, Ron Spence, and Bennet Francois. Keith Spence was more than just a valuable member of our team, but was one for whom we respected and cared. Valerie Linklater, Beverly McDonald and Margaret McDonald contributed by not only cooking for the field workers, but by their kindness and warmth.