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## Copters shouldn't disturb thrushes

Army: Whiteface training is not expected to imperil rare bird

By CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Senior Staff Writer

The U.S. Army says its proposal to continue helicopter training missions at Whiteface Mountain this summer and fall will have no "measurable" impact on a rare bird that nests on the mountain's upper slopes, and most environmentalists seem to agree.

The 10th Mountain Division's Combat Aviation Brigade, based at Fort Drum, issued a "Finding of No Significant Impact" report last week on its plan to continue high-altitude helicopter flight training at Whiteface in preparation for the brigade's scheduled deployment to Afghanistan in October. The Army also wants to conduct training sessions over five years, from October through May, once the brigade returns from Afghanistan.

The brigade flew training missions at Whiteface from April 1 to mid-May of this year. The Army's plan to resume those missions by July 1 initially drew concern from environmental groups both in and outside the Park.

The Adirondack Council, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and Northern New York Audubon submitted letters to the Army citing concerns about the potential impact the helicopter missions could have on the Bicknell's thrush, a rare migratory songbird that breeds on the upper slopes of Whiteface and other mountains in the Northeast from mid-May through July.

"It is very likely that Bicknell's thrush and other birds are still and will be nesting on the mountain during the month of July, and there exists a significant potential for disturbance to those nests," wrote Michael Burger, director of conservation and science for Northern New York Audubon.

The state Adirondack Park Agency also raised concerns about the proposal. Deputy Director James Connolly said the agency disagreed with the finding of "no significant impact" and called for a full environmental review.

In response to some of those concerns, the Army modified its plan and said it wouldn't resume training flights until after Aug. 1, when most young Bicknell's thrushes have hatched and left their nests.

Since the primary breeding period for Bicknell's thrushes has come and gone this year, and the helicopter training missions still have yet to resume, most environmentalists and the APA don't seem as concerned now as they had been.

"We asked them to delay until after Aug. 1 because that, to the best of our knowledge, is the point at which most birds ought to be fledged," said Michael Glennon of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Saranac Lake-based Adirondack Communities and Conservation Program. "They still will be present on the mountain, but the likelihood of them being able to get out of the way and have relatively less impact from a helicopter landing would certainly be better after they were no longer on nests."

Glennon said the Bicknell's thrush, which winters in the Dominican Republic, Haiti and other islands in the Caribbean, typically leaves the Northeast by the end of September.

Christopher Rimmer, executive director of the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, initially wrote to the Army with concerns about its proposal to resume helicopter training missions in July, at the height of the Bicknell's thrush nesting period. The sites where the helicopters plan to touch down on Whiteface, at the so-called Lake Placid and Wilmington turns on the Veterans Memorial Highway, are in "core Bicknell's thrush habitat on the mountain," Rimmer wrote.

Now that the brigade plans to run its missions after Aug. 1, Rimmer told the Enterprise Tuesday that he's not as concerned because the birds "are less vulnerable at that point."

"There's no guarantee, but I certainly believe there will be fewer impacts than there would have been during the period of active nesting," he said.

Rimmer noted that he can't say definitively what the impacts to the birds would be.

"Nobody can," he said. "It would be interesting to conduct some studies to evaluate those impacts, but I think it would be very difficult."

The Army plans to conduct monitoring of the birds each year, even though future training flights, after this year, would take place outside of the breeding season from early October to mid-May.

APA spokesman Keith McKeever said the agency is pleased with the steps the Army has taken to mitigate potential impacts to migratory birds and alpine vegetation.

"To their credit, they've agreed to do some monitoring and make their training periods not coincide with when the Bicknell's thrush is known to be breeding," he said. "It appears they will also be using just a touch-and-go type of operation and landing on pavement only."

If the helicopter training activity continues, McKeever said potential impacts should be studied as part of a review of the Whiteface Mountain Unit Management Plan.

But not all environmentalists are on board with the plan to resume the flights this summer. John Sheehan, communications director of the Adirondack Council, said Bicknell's thrushes are still on Whiteface in August and September.

"Our concern is for the full season that the bird is here, not just the breeding period," he said. "Young and adult birds are still present on the mountaintop, so there is still the danger of

collision with the helicopter blades. Given that there are so few left in the world to begin with, we don't want to see any of them killed."

Sheehan suggested the Army consider another location for its training sessions this summer.

The Army, in its report, said it looked at alternative sites, including helicopter training facilities in Colorado, but said the brigade is on a "condensed training timeline" and late-arriving pilots weren't able to train at those facilities. It also said Whiteface Mountain is the best site in New York to provide Fort Drum-based helicopter pilots and crews with a "realistic mountainous, high-altitude environment to conduct flight operations."

Up to 22 one-hour training missions would be held per week on and around the mountain using Apache, Black Hawk, Chinook and Kiowa helicopters. The Army says the training would occur Monday through Thursday, early in the morning or at dusk, when the highway is closed to the public and there are no conflicts with ski area operations or special events.

State Department of Environmental Conservation spokeswoman Maureen Wren said DEC worked with the Army and the state Olympic Regional Development Authority, which runs the ski center and the Veterans Highway, to mitigate potential environmental impacts of the helicopter missions this summer and fall.

"For the future activities, because there are additional years proposed, we will continue to work with the military and other agencies to review and evaluate those proposals," she said.

It's unclear what additional approval the Army needs to begin the training missions. A spokesperson for the 10th Mountain Division couldn't be reached for comment on Tuesday.

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