

Edmonton Journal

High-wire bird hazards fitted with lights: St. Albert's Big Lake wetlands area used to test special reflectors

Monday, September 5, 2005

Page: A9

Section: Cityplus

Byline: Jeff Holubitsky

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

Illustrations: Colour Photo: Supplied / AltaLink environmental specialist Nikki Krochko holds up a reflector designed to prevent migrating birds from flying into power lines.

EDMONTON -- If a utility company's project works out, about 75 bright little warning signs swaying on power lines above St. Albert's Big Lake wetland area should make life safer for migrating birds this fall.

"Anytime there is a structure in the air it can pose a hazard to birds, and in the Big Lake area there is a lot of activity with different types of waterfowl," says John Rasmussen, environment manager of

AltaLink, Alberta's largest rural electrical transmission company with more than 11,000 kilometres of power lines.

He says the Big Lake area was chosen for the \$10,000 pilot project because it is easy to monitor and because it has a large number of migrating birds in the spring and fall. "There have been impacts on the wire, so obviously we are aware of that, and that is why we are initiating a pilot project there to see what we can do to mitigate it."

The orange, yellow and white markers were installed every five to 10 metres over Riel Pond and the Sturgeon River last week by crews using a helicopter.

Rasmussen says the types of birds most at risk are the larger ones, such as herons or swans, as well as the smaller diving ducks.

The index-card-sized markers, which cost about \$50 each, were chosen because positive results in U.S. trials indicated reflectors can reduce collisions with wires by up to 90 per cent, he says. "We did a lot of research to find the best marking device and there are a lot out there."

Atco also is testing the reflectors near Drumheller.

Rasmussen says the devices reflect visible and ultraviolet light because birds are capable of seeing both. "That's quite important because in low light or overcast conditions you still get a lot of UV coming through the cloud cover."

The markers also glow faintly in the dark, helping to make wires visible during short migration days in early spring or late fall, Rasmussen adds.

AltaLink will have staff monitor the Big Lake reflectors to see how effective the markers are. If they live up to their early promise, the reflectors could be used at other locations in the province, such as at wetlands near Brooks.

While the reflectors might provide migrating birds with some warning, Alberta Fish and Wildlife biologist Mark Heckbert says the only way to prevent bird deaths would be to move the electrical lines away from wetlands or to bury them.

"These things are not a solution to proper line routing," Heckbert says. "What I advocate is to make sure these lines, if they are above ground, are not placed in important pathways to and from a lake."

Few studies in Alberta or across North America accurately document the number of birds killed in collisions with power lines, he says, because carcasses are usually eaten quickly by scavengers, such as coyotes or crows, before anyone finds them. However, Heckbert believes power lines are the biggest killer of trumpeter swans, a species particularly susceptible to collisions because their large size makes it difficult to change directions quickly.

"Power lines in Alberta are the biggest single known mortality for adult trumpeter swans," he says, adding that he was not aware of any similar studies on other Alberta species.

Every year between six and 10 swan carcasses are found beneath lines in the Grande Prairie area, but Heckbert says this number is likely a tiny fraction of the total deaths. "I think the reflectors are of limited value because they are not going to work well during foggy conditions or in snow storms, which are common conditions during peak migration times for birds in Alberta."

University of Alberta graduate researcher Cindy Platt, with the Wildlife Rehabilitation Society of Edmonton, welcomes the project and was on hand last week to see the reflectors installed.

"We do get some birds at the rehab that have collided with the power lines and anything they can do to reduce that is all right," she says.

"It has worked in the States and I'm very optimistic it will work here."

jholubitsky@thejournal.canwest.com