

West Nile bird found in Markham

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

Although just one positive case has been identified, York Region health workers remain on the alert in the vigil against the West Nile Virus.

A dead bird found in Markham near the intersection of Steeles Avenue and Hwy. 404 is presumed to have died because of the virus, which is spread by mosquitoes.

The health department is awaiting confirmation of that finding from a federal lab in Winnipeg.

The finding proves the virus, which has killed several people in the United States, is still present in the area, said Dr. Hanif Kassam, associate medical officer of health for York Region.

"West Nile Virus is something that is not going to go away," Dr. Kassam said Wednesday.

"It's something that's also spreading," he said. "It used to be limited to Ontario only; now we're seeing birds (infected with the virus) in Quebec and Ontario."

The virus, first detected in New York State in the late 1990s, has continued a steady migration north and west.

This summer in the Winnipeg area 15 dead birds have tested positive for the virus. More alarming, six people are currently undergoing testing for the virus, which can cause viral meningitis and encephalitis and can, in some cases, be fatal.

Locally, health officials are quick to point out no human cases of the virus have been detected and that contraction is actually a minor risk. It is estimated that, even in areas where the virus has been detected, it is carried by less than 1-per-cent of mosquitoes.

But this summer, as with the past couple of years, the health department is taking steps to educate the public about the threat and urging them to take steps to reduce their risk of exposure. Those steps include avoiding being bitten by mosquitoes and eliminating standing water and other areas in which mosquitoes can breed.

And the region is spending \$218,000 in provincial funding to monitor the mosquito population for signs of the virus this year, Dr. Kassam said.

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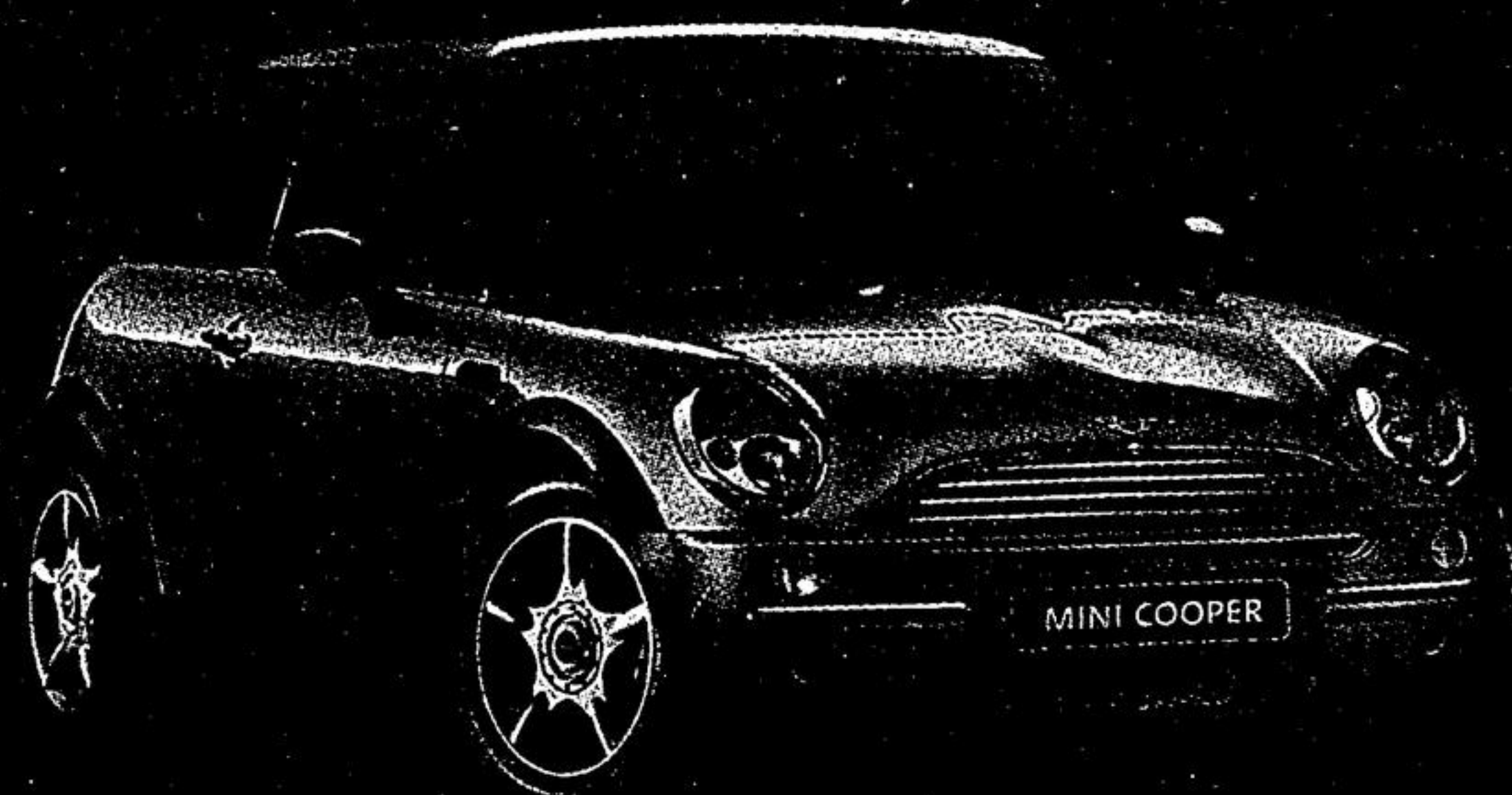
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