

# Falcon journey key to West Nile mystery?

Tracking route big help, supporters say

BY MIKE ADLER  
Staff Writer

A falcon-tracking program facing cancellation in York Region could be a big help to humans in the fight against West Nile virus, supporters say.

The Canadian Peregrine Foundation, which since 1999 has released peregrine falcons in Richmond Hill and tracked them by satellite, is appealing for money to finish the program's final year.

The latest of the tracked birds, named Miriam and Richmond, were injected with a West Nile vaccine before their release last summer. The foundation plans to find them after mating season this year and sample their blood to test the vaccine's effectiveness.

By visiting their nest sites and testing offspring, researchers can find out if the endangered birds pass on antibodies from the vaccine, said peregrine foundation president Mark Nash, who this week asked Richmond Hill council for \$60,000 to cover the program's testing, tracking and other expenses.

"No answers will come quickly, unfortunately."

Local birders, meanwhile, say crows and chickadees, which seemed to be reduced in numbers south of the Oak Ridges Moraine during Christmas bird counts a year ago, were seen more frequently this time.

Crows are seen as an "early warning species" for the virus, since they are especially prone to catching it and dying in a few days.

A Dec. 14 count centred on Kleinburg and covering areas west of Hwy. 400 found crows and chickadees in normal, even above-average, numbers, said Bill Edmunds, past president of the West Humber Naturalists.

"Most groups commented that there were chickadees everywhere," he said this week. Crows, missing almost entirely last year, "have come back quite a bit."

Crows don't necessarily migrate, but peregrines do, and the foundation's research shows they travel as far south as Colombia. Tracking them can help show migration routes the virus will use to spread, Richmond Hill biologist Natalie Helferty said this month.

By inoculating birds (with vaccine) now, we may be reducing the virus in future mosquito populations by reducing the spread of the disease, Ms. Helferty, president of the Richmond Hill Naturalists who assist the peregrine foundation in its York Region work, said in a message to naturalists and politicians.

"If the disease can spread across the globe so quickly, why can't we introduce antibodies to do

the same?"

There are only 41 breeding pairs of peregrines in Ontario, Judi Orendorff, who coordinates West Nile information for the Ministry of Natural Resources, said it would be interesting to see if the vaccine works and that rare or threatened birds could benefit. "I think it's important that we continue to get answers to these questions," she said.

But Dr. Bruce Hunter, the University of Guelph professor and avian pathologist who inoculated the Richmond Hill peregrines, said no one should risk recapturing and handling wild peregrines because it may disturb mating or nesting.

He added a study might work with captive birds. "That's the only way these answers are going to come."

And Dr. Chris Davies, the ministry's wildlife research manager and head of the province's rabies control program, doubted antibodies from West Nile vaccine could spread through populations of birds. Pregnant foxes who have

taken rabies vaccine do not spread those antibodies to their offspring, he said.

And although West Nile may reduce bird populations in the short term, massive fluctuations in those populations are normal. Weather alone can explain big differences in numbers of birds seen year to year, he said.

York Region, which had two confirmed human cases of West Nile last year, found nine crows with the virus. In April, a specimen in Newmarket was the first crow in 2003 to test positive for West Nile in Canada.

On orders from the province, however, only 54 crows of the 925 picked up by the region were sent for testing, "so the positive crows reported are not a true reflection of the number of positive crows throughout the region," York's health department said in a report this week.



## LEGEND

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- Positive bird cases, 2003

# Beetle news offered to residents

If an Asian long-horned beetle crawled out of your woodpile, would you spot it?

Concerned the tree-boring beetle infesting parts of Woodbridge could spread unnoticed throughout York Region, federal and provincial authorities will be at meetings here to give residents the latest news on the inch-long, white-speckled black insect.

"We feel it's really important that people understand the seriousness of the threat of this pest," said Brian Peterkin, coordinator of York Environmental Stewardship, a local advisory group for Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources.

The group hosts free information sessions on the beetles at 7 p.m. in Vaughan Jan. 22 and in Whitchurch-Stouffville Feb. 5.

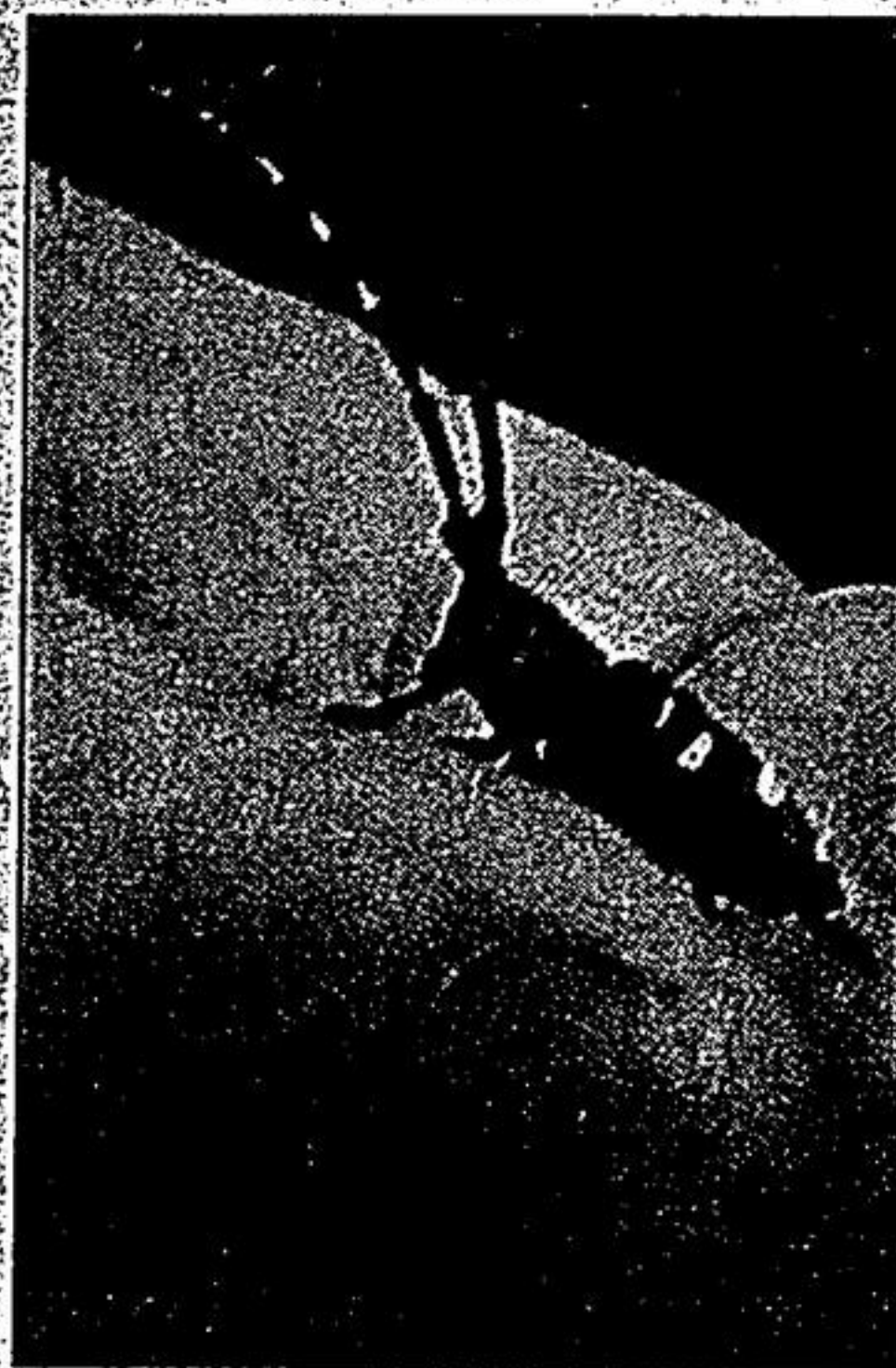
Attendees will hear from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which is destroying thousands of trees in Woodbridge this winter to erase the first known Canadian long-horned beetle infestation.

The beetle, which can fly and leaves distinctive holes in hardwood trees, was discovered beside a Steeles Avenue plaza in September, years after it arrived in a crate or packing material.

In the United States, infested firewood has spread the beetles to new areas.

The Vaughan meeting is at Boyd Field Centre on Islington Avenue, north of Major Mackenzie Drive. The Whitchurch-Stouffville event is at Ballantrae Community Centre on Aurora Sideroad east of Hwy. 48.

People interested in attending should call 416-661-6600, ext. 5660.



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