More study needed on bird migration

The article "Foul winds blow at workshop" (March 10, 2011) dealt with a conference put on by the Kingston Field Naturalists two days earlier. The article highlighted the lively exchanges which took place between John Bennett, Executive Director of the Sierra Club of Canada, and some members of the audience.

However, the workshop was about more than that rather confrontational moment, which took place at the end of the afternoon. In fact the purpose of the event, as proposed by the KFN, was "... to discuss what is currently known about bird migration routes in Eastern Ontario." What the organizers hope to do is to develop a body of knowledge about this subject so that environmental assessments carried out for wind farm projects can be evaluated. Clearly this topic is important in view of the siting of the recently built Wolfe Island wind farm and the quite advanced proposals for additional sites on Amherst Island and at Ostrander Point in Prince Edward County -- both in the midst of internationally recognized Important Bird Areas. The levels of bird kills at the Wolfe Island site (also an Important Bird Area) have surprised many people and obviously raise concerns about the sort of planning that should be done to minimize such damage when other sites are being considered for approval. Similar concerns arise regarding bats of several species, which are also affected.

I attended the workshop and found it a most interesting day. It featured several presentations by people with knowledge of bird habitat and migration. I heard a lot that was new to me, in too great a detail to attempt to summarize here. However, a number of points struck me as indicating the extent of the problems facing our bird populations as the number of wind turbines in the Kingston area grows:

¦ Of the 378 bird species known to occur in the Kingston area, at least 90% are migratory.

¦ Many species are in serious decline, particularly over the last 20 years.

¦ Wind turbines affect not only migrating birds and bats, but also those that breed and forage at the turbine sites.

¦ The migration season is longer than many people realize, with the northward migration starting (depending on species) as early as January and continuing until June, and the southward passage running between July and November.

¦ Each migrating species has a distinct pattern of migration, varying as to time of year, time of day and the route taken. Some birds migrate only at night, others exclusively by day, and still others both day and night. Some species fly directly across Lake Ontario, gathering for this purpose in great numbers at headlands such as Prince Edward Point. Others avoid the lake, instead skirting it along the shore and continuing their journey through areas at the end of the lake. These facts have implications for the siting of wind

farms both on the lakebed and on land near such staging areas as Prince Edward Point, as well as along the shore of the lake at many points.

¦ The migration patterns of many species are still not well understood. Much of what is known about migration and the distribution of birds in the Kingston area is the result of studies carried out over many years at the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory and by the KFN.

Among animal species, birds and bats are uniquely affected by big wind turbines. Many of us have assumed that, before sites are approved, the planning process for wind farms would have included special studies of migration patterns so that kills of migrating species could be minimized. This has happened only to a limited degree. It is time for all of us to become more knowledgeable about this situation while the wind generation industry is still in its infancy.

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