

OPG TAKES PART IN GROUNDBREAKING BIRD TRACKING SYSTEM



They come by the thousands, and yet few ever notice their presence. Swooping silently over rivers and valleys, birds from across the continent are heading steadily southward for their annual migration. They travel thousands of kilometers, but their precise routes have remained a mystery –until now.

This fall, researchers from Bird Studies Canada (BSC), an organization dedicated to conserving Canada's birds, will be tagging along for the ride. It's all thanks to a revolutionary wildlife tracking system called Motus.

"It's a groundbreaking research effort," says Stuart Mackenzie, Migration Program Manager at Bird Studies Canada. "Using a network of more than 300 receivers stationed across the western hemisphere, we can track the detailed movements of thousands of birds fitted with miniaturized radio transmitters."

A long-time supporter of Ontario's biodiversity, OPG is taking part in the experiment. This year, BSC installed a receiver at OPG's R.H. Saunders Generating Station –and according to MacKenzie, it's expected to log a number of species of conservation concern.

"We're expecting to see a lot of migratory shorebirds coming down from the arctic in the coming months," he says. "A lot of these species have been experiencing severe population declines, like the red knot."

An iconic species that breeds in Canada's arctic, the Red Knot overwinters as far south as Tierra del Fuego in Argentina. It's one of more than 85 species of birds, bats, and large insects Motus has monitored. Over 8,000 individual animals have been fitted with miniaturized radio transmitters, each weighing as little as 0.2 grams. These tags can provide an astounding level of detail about an animal's movement and behaviour.

"Migratory birds cover thousands of kilometers in their annual journeys, which made studying them very difficult from a conservation standpoint," says Mackenzie. "Thanks to Motus, we can gather a wealth of data about a bird's migration routes, where it stops, and how long it stays in certain areas which will help to inform conservation efforts."

Birds aren't the only winged creature OPG has been supporting. Working with its corporate biodiversity partners, the company has helped protect bats, pollinators, and dragonflies. This fall, it will be working with Earth Rangers to protect the eastern small-footed bat, which is endangered in Ontario.

Back at Saunders, the Motus receiver has already detected northbound migrants from Colombia. The next data upload will occur later this fall. It's a big moment, but regardless of what flies past it, Mackenzie already knows the information it provides will be invaluable.

"Birds are a primary indicator of ecological health," he says. "If we can keep bird populations healthy, we'll be well on our way to an environmentally sound future. Knowing how and where they migrate is a critical piece of the conservation puzzle."

