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## Birds flock to Canada's boreal woods, study says

BY BOB WEBER

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Scientists are calling it "the nursery."

A new scientific study shows that Canada's boreal forest is even more important to birds across North America than previously thought - making it, researchers say, even more important to protect.

The study, sponsored by Bird Studies Canada, an independent research group, suggests that roughly one out of every three birds on the continent peeped its first cheep in a nest somewhere in the vast belt of green stretching across the north of virtually all Canadian provinces and the territories.

The report, released yesterday, is entitled North America's Bird Nursery.

"It is quite extraordinary," said Gregor Beck of Bird Studies Canada.

"It is not extravagant to say the boreal forest is home to billions of birds."

Boreal forests extend across North America, Europe and Asia.

Although it faces increasing industrial pressure, Canada's section of it is the largest intact stand left on the planet. At about five million square kilometres, it covers almost half the country.

The report finds that 57 per cent of the commonly occurring birds in the U.S. and Canada depend on the boreal forest at some point, either for breeding, migrating or regular habitat.

The breeding statistics, however, may be the most impressive.

About 38 per cent of all waterfowl in North America are born in the boreal.

For land birds, the figure is 30 per cent -- a figure that holds for shorebirds as well.

In total, the report estimates somewhere between 1.7 billion and three billion birds feather their nests in Canada's boreal forest. Birds that migrate as far south as the Caribbean return every year to hatch their chicks.

"The boreal is globally significant," Mr. Beck said.

The report underlines the importance of careful management of the boreal, he added.

Energy development in areas such as the Mackenzie Valley in the Northwest Territories and increased mineral exploration -- in addition to continuing logging across the entire forest -- could threaten habitat.

"There is going to be industrial activity out there, so we need to ensure it's done to the highest standard," Mr. Beck said.

A two-year-old agreement among environmental, aboriginal and industry groups is already starting to show some results in that direction, said Monte Hummel of the World Wildlife Fund.

The Boreal Forest Conservation Framework, signed in 2003, has helped communities in the NWT identify 20 areas involving 12 million hectares to be set aside from development in the Mackenzie Valley, with another 30 million hectares likely.

In the more southern stretches of the boreal, what Mr. Hummel calls the "working forest," four forestry companies and the Forest Products Association of Canada are in discussions involving another 50 million hectares, Mr. Hummel said.

Those discussions would involve both setting areas aside and changing logging practices.

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