

GN-01: Aircraft Overhead Flight Altitudes	
Department	Environment
Organization	Government of Nunavut (GN)
Subject/Topic	Aircraft Overhead Flight Altitudes
References	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised “NIRB Application for Screening #125884 OPP 2.0 Baseline Shoreline Mapping 2024,” NIRB File No. 24YN012, NIRB Project No. 125884 (2024). • <i>Wildlife Act</i>, S.Nu. 2003, c.26
CONCERNS	
<p>Environment and Climate Change Canada’s (the Proponent) application for screening states that they plan to collect key shoreline information (i.e., high-resolution, geotagged videos and photos) to help emergency responders plan and prepare for potential marine pollution incidents. The Proponent’s application states that low-altitude helicopter overflights and drones (where possible) will be used to collect this information.</p> <p>Nunavut’s <i>Wildlife Act</i> offers protection to wildlife from human-induced disturbance. For example, section 74 (1) states: “No person shall chase, weary, harass or molest a wild animal.” Section 87(1)(d) further states that, “(1) Unless authorized under subsection (2) or the regulations, no person shall use a vehicle or other conveyance to harass wildlife[.]” The GN notes that aircraft, such as helicopters or drones, can result in sensory disturbance to wildlife.</p> <p>The GN acknowledges that the Proponent has recognized the potential for disturbance to wildlife due to low-altitude helicopter overflights and lists mitigation measures in the ‘Environmental Impacts’ section of the Proponent’s screening application (p. 13):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Prior to initiation, identify and map sensitive sites (such as breeding, nesting, calving, migration) so we are aware of their location.</i> - <i>Seasonally (mid May-mid-July) [sic] avoid caribou birthing/rearing habitats by limiting helicopter [flight] altitudes to a minimum of 400m above the ground.</i> - <i>Select particular routes, heli-pads, heli-spots for all helicopter activities to avoid caribou birthing/rearing areas.</i> - <i>Avoid landing sites on or near critical seasonal caribou habitats.</i> - <i>No circling above wildlife if spotted.</i> - <i>Avoid bear feeding sites, by limiting helicopter flights altitudes to a minimum of 400m above the ground and avoid general bear [habitat] by limiting helicopter flights altitudes to a minimum of 200m above the ground.</i> - <i>[Limiting] helicopter overflights to a minimum of 400m above the ground in areas around waterfowl and shorebirds, and no circling over wetlands and flocks of birds.</i> 	

- Utilizing existing airstrips or using existing disturbed areas for helicopter takeoff and landings.
- Predetermine suitable flight routes to: maintain avoidance distance, visual screening and reduced frequency of flights near critical areas.
- Identify suitable landing sites in advance.
- Plan fieldwork outside of calving/nesting/birthing season.
- Convey the mitigation measures to all staff.

While the above section indicates flight altitudes in metres above the ground, the 'Material Use' table within the Proponent's screening application provides a different reference flight altitude (in feet above the water). For example:

"...low-altitude helicopter overflights (approximately 60-70 knots, 200-300 feet elevation above the water, and 300ft off the shoreline) are conducted at the study site to capture video of the shoreline characteristics." (p. 10)

Additionally, the GN notes that the Proponent's application materials do not indicate any vertical or horizontal distance buffers that the Proponent will follow when operating drones, to minimize potential wildlife disturbance.

REQUESTS / RECOMMENDATIONS

The GN requests the Proponent use a consistent unit for how flight altitudes are expressed in the 'Material Use' table and 'Environmental Impacts' section of the Proponent's screening application (see pp. 10, 13).

The GN recommends the Proponent also provide information on vertical or horizontal distance buffers that will be used by drone pilots to minimize potential wildlife disturbance caused by drones.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The GN generally recommends that all 'manned' aircraft (i.e., piloted helicopters and planes, as opposed to 'unmanned') maintain a minimum altitude of 610 metres (2000ft) above ground level during point-to-point travel, where specific altitudes are not critical to the mission or use of the aircraft, to minimize disturbance to wildlife. The GN notes that this recommended altitude is subject and secondary to the safety of the aircraft and its occupants.