



# Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council

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## Media Update – 2011-07

### Major Fish and Bird Die-off – Southern Georgian Bay



**Carcass of a lake sturgeon found near Lafontaine Beach – Tiny Township**  
(Photo Credit: Wendy Mullin)

A 'big blow' in the early part of October seemed to bring a plague of death to marine birds (ducks, gulls, loons) and fish in Southern Georgian Bay – particularly in the vicinity of Wasaga Beach. Testing conducted by the MNR at the University of Guelph has now confirmed the birds consumed fish contaminated with Type E botulism.

Although the huge magnitude of the die-off became apparent in October, Ministry spokesman John Cooper says the Ministry has received sporadic reports of dead fish and birds since August. Cooper said this is the largest bird die-off Georgian Bay has ever experienced. He did note about a decade ago a die-off in eastern Lake Erie of about 18,000 birds occurred.

Type E botulism toxin is produced by a bacterium that lives in lake-bottom sediment. Under certain conditions - rich nutrient source, lack of oxygen, and optimum temperature, the bacterium begins producing the toxin. It then enters the food chain, primarily affecting birds and fish – especially those feeding near the bottom.

The MNR report this is not a highly unusual event – several die-offs have occurred in previous years on Lake Huron and Lake Erie. However, the large number of birds and fish related to this event is particularly disturbing. The number of dead birds has been reported as high as 6,000 in the media. Ministry of Natural Resources staff estimate 1 – 2,000 birds have washed up in the Wasaga Beach area.

The magnitude of the fish die-off is even more uncertain. Fish species most affected include channel catfish, freshwater drum, carp, and lake whitefish. Of particular concern is the reported loss of about 120 lake sturgeon by Wasaga Beach Provincial Park staff. Bay wide - undoubtedly many more have succumbed. This die-off is a major setback in the painfully slow recovery of this 'threatened' species, now listed under the Species at Risk Act.

Cooper says the botulism toxin is readily destroyed by heat. Fish and birds that people harvest are not a health risk if properly cooked. The bacterium becomes active in dead organisms, so the ministry is advising people to keep their children and pets away from dead animals on the shoreline.

The ministry is cleaning up provincial park land and private landowners are responsible for disposing of fish or birds on their property. Cooper says there are three options: leave the carcass and let it decay, bury it, or double-bag it for municipal waste pickup. He says if landowners choose to dispose of the birds, they should wear gloves and wash up after.

Of particular concern to Bay residents and environmentalists alike – is what's causing the problem? The precise mechanism of what triggers this event and what can be done about it – is still unclear. The invasion of quagga and zebra mussels as well as round gobies have been implicated as contributing factors, but their precise role is unclear.

Shoreline property owners and others who want to report dead or dying waterfowl may call the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre toll-free at 1-866-673-4781. To report fish die-offs, call the Ministry of Natural Resources at 1-866-929-0994.

Further information is available at the MNR website:  
[http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/en/Business/FW/2ColumnSubPage/STDPROD\\_090632.html](http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/en/Business/FW/2ColumnSubPage/STDPROD_090632.html).