

Fort Drum helicopters to train over Adirondacks in August

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A Blackhawk helicopter in flight. Photo by U.S. Army Specialist Josue Patricio

Birds—the military kind—will soon fly over the Adirondacks for a nearly weeklong training exercise of the U.S. Army’s 10th Combat Aviation Brigade at Fort Drum.

A total of 27 aircraft, flying in fleets of four, will travel from Aug. 8 through the 13th from Rome, New York to private property in the area of Blue Mountain Lake. The training exercise, called Falcon’s Peak, will involve AH-64 Apache, UH-60 Blackhawk and HH-60 medevac helicopters.

Veronica Bryant Bean, public affairs officer for the 10th Combat Aviation Division, said the training event will be the most concentrated and largest number of helicopters flying on the same mission since a similar exercise conducted in 2018 in the Newcomb area. The exercise was not conducted in 2019 because troops were deployed to Afghanistan. It was not conducted again last year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“It’s imperative that our aviators are trained in diverse environments,” Bean said. “We are exposed to conflict all over the world, unfortunately. If we could only fly on Fort Drum, we wouldn’t be able to get the scales of flying over water, mountains, low treetop levels.”

The aircraft will fly above 1,000 feet, but in some nonresidential areas they could fly as low as 200 feet above ground, Bean said. A private landowner near Blue Mountain Lake volunteered their land for the U.S. Army’s use and Bean said some people may see aircraft loitering in the area. Bean said there will be no land-based military vehicles in the Adirondacks as part of the exercise.

From Aug. 9 to Aug. 12, the Army is expected to conduct some nighttime flights as well.

“We don’t get to choose when we fight in combat,” Bean said. “We need our aviators to maintain safety regulations. They are required to fly a certain amount of time in the day and night.”

The Army wished to alert the public of their upcoming training so no one is caught off guard, Bean added.

The upcoming training and its location did come as a surprise to some members of an ad hoc committee the Army formed at the end of last year to review environmental impacts and potential training locations. The committee, made up of representatives from the state Department of Environmental Conservation, Adirondack Park Agency and environmental advocacy groups, met in response to a programmatic environmental assessment the Army released about [increased training in the Adirondack region](#).

Following those meetings and public feedback, [the Army had announced it will avoid forest preserve lands](#), sensitive wildlife areas and community hubs. The area of Blue Mountain Lake had never been proposed in the assessment, however. That concerned some ad hoc committee members because of the area’s proximity to the forest preserve.

John Sheehan, communications director for the Adirondack Council, has been a member of the ad hoc committee convened recently and in years past.

“News to me,” he said on Wednesday of Fort Drum’s aviation training plans for August near Blue Mountain Lake. “I don’t recall that being an option presented to us.”

[David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve](#), was also on the ad hoc committee. He, too, was not aware of any upcoming air training nor that the Blue Mountain Lake region was an option. Gibson said he was concerned that even if the Army was training on private property there could be effects to the forest preserve and wildlife. Later on Thursday, Gibson received a phone call from an Army colonel who assured him no soldiers would be landing on the property and the Adirondacks part of the training focused on flying only.

A DEC spokesperson said the department was aware of the training exercise.

“DEC anticipates minimal impacts to wildlife,” the spokesperson wrote. “The flights over Forest Preserve will be transitory, causing only brief disturbance, if any. Proposed flight routes were chosen to minimize or avoid impacts to sensitive habitats.”

The DEC added that the flight paths also “appear to minimize the distances to be flown over Wilderness areas.”

Bean said the Army has a coordinator for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, to avoid conflicts over endangered or sensitive species protections. For example, the Army has identified a new bald eagle’s nest and will avoid disturbing it.

Also news to some of the ad hoc committee members was that the Army finalized its programmatic environmental assessment in April.

The draft assessment originally rolled out last summer and was filled with misunderstandings about the Adirondack Park. The Army, for example, did not appear to know that the park’s forest preserve is constitutionally protected, or know about the Adirondack Park Agency and its role managing public and private use. The information has since been updated in the April 2021 assessment.

In an email that Gibson sent to Fort Drum and DEC officials and shared with the *Adirondack Explorer*, he said he received varying information from both entities “about what to expect” when it came to the training. As a member of the ad hoc committee, he had expected to know about the revised environmental assessment, the Army’s training and site selection ahead of time.

“I fully appreciate that the Army is working with the state agencies and a private landowner and is not conducting training on the public’s Forest Preserve, avoiding sensitive locations such as bald eagle nesting sites and is observing other decisions reached with us last winter,” Gibson wrote. “My sole concern here is an apparent gap in providing us with advance information.”

