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## **Trained falcons keep gulls on the move at Seneca Meadows Landfill in Waterloo**

Published: Jan. 22, 2012, 5:43 a.m.



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Falcons at the Seneca Meadows Landfill

By **David Figura** | [dfigura@nyup.com](mailto:dfigura@nyup.com)

The Seneca Meadows Landfill in Waterloo has two falconers and a flock of 10 trained falcons that work to keep the landfill's gull population at a minimum.

"Each year we have an open house and every year (the falcons) always draw the biggest crowd. It's the same every year," said Peter Baker, the landfill's senior design engineer.



No gulls are killed in the process. The falcons are trained to fly about and stoop (dive quickly from the air) at a "lure," which is a piece of leather on a string that's swung around the falconer's head. That action, accompanied by the use of pyrotechnics, scares the garbage-eating birds away.

"It's really amazing how effective it is," Baker said.

It seems, though, that landfills and huge flocks of gulls go hand in hand.

Why not? Landfills offer a variety of food for the birds to dine on, provided on nearly a daily basis. Since the original construction of Seneca Meadows in 1983, the birds have been a given.

However, when the landfill expanded to include a section along Route 414, landfill administrators began giving the flocks of gulls a second thought. The excessive number of birds created health and liability concerns, being so close to the road.

"That's because of all the bird poop, the pathogens they carry and that type of thing," Baker said. "And what if something is dropped on the road (by a gull). Is anyone going to get hurt? I don't know, but if you're driving along and a chicken bone hits your windshield or something like that ... there's a safety thing."

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As many as 50,000 birds were counted in a single day, and, as a result, the landfill was given permission by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to take some of them out.

However, using workers with shotguns would have been a public relations fiasco, Baker said, not to mention a safety hazard to landfill workers and the more than 400 trash hauling trucks that visit the landfill almost daily.

Landfill administrators decided on a non-violent alternative — the use of falcons, a technique favored by Canadian landfills.

Today, the landfill has two trained falconers who manage the 10 birds, which are hybrids of three species — peregrine, gyr and saker falcons. Falcons are used because they're quick and chase other birds. They're also less expensive than hawks and eagles.

Different sized falcons are used to scare the various sized gulls, said Steve Arndt, one of the landfill's falconers. The most popular gulls at the landfill are herring gulls, ring-billed and large black-backed gulls, he said. Periodically, particularly during the spring and fall migratory seasons, certain rare species will stop at the landfill, such as Icelandic gulls.

The falconers, employees of Falcon Environmental Services, a Plattsburgh-based company, work 365 days a year because, if nothing else, the birds have to be fed daily to ward off illness or other problems.

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Arndt took one of the falcons, Sheila, a peregrine, down near one of the landfill's holding ponds to demonstrate how she's used. After he removed the hood from the bird, it took flight and circled around him. He then took out the lure and swung it over his head on a string. As the bird dived to grab the lure, he quickly pulled it away, causing the bird each time to bank and then fly higher for another try.

Each time the bird caught the lure, it was given a treat — a chunk of quail or chicken.

The flapping of the falcon's wings, the circling and the constant stooping to grab the lure, combined with the firing of pyrotechnics, sends a message to the gulls. They're giving the impression that one of their own is being attacked, and that the landfill is a dangerous place.

Arndt said the number of gulls at Seneca Meadows goes up and down, depending on the time of year. Last week, for example, there were between 500 and 1,000.

Stuart Rossell, manager of U.S. operations for Falcon Environmental Services, said his company's services are also at High Acres Landfill near Rochester, and at one time were used at JFK Airport. Other customers include landfills in Canada and New Jersey, along with several military bases.

"All the birds we use we raise ourselves," he said. "The best ones we use for only four to five years, and bring them back to breed more. Some of our birds have been used at landfills (in Canada) for 10-11 years."

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Although the falcons are trained, they occasionally fly off, Arndt said.

A radio transmitter is put on one of their legs to help the falconers track and find them. Since the falcon program started at Seneca Meadows in 2004, the landfill's falconers have only lost three birds, which were each valued at about \$2,500, Rossell said.

If necessary, the landfill's falconers will go up in an airplane to track a bird. Other times, they just get in a truck and drive.

"Three weeks ago, we had one fly off and we got it back on Nine Foot Road, which is about 5 to 6 miles away," Arndt said.

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