

The Carmel Pine Cone

Volume 96 No. 21

On the Internet: www.carmelpinecone.com

May 21-27, 2010

YOUR SOURCE FOR LOCAL NEWS, ARTS AND OPINION SINCE 1915

It's bird vs. bird at the landfill — and the birds of prey are winning

By KELLY NIX

UNTIL JUST two months ago, thousands of shrieking seagulls would converge on the Marina landfill every day, distracting workers, pecking through trash and pooping everywhere.

The coastal birds have long flocked to the dump to feast on a smorgasbord of landfill leftovers, such as fast food, chicken bones and rotting fruit.

But that's all changed. There are new birds in town, and they're shaking things up.

"I don't know where the seagulls are," Monterey Regional Waste Management District general manager William Merry told The Pine Cone. "But they are not here."

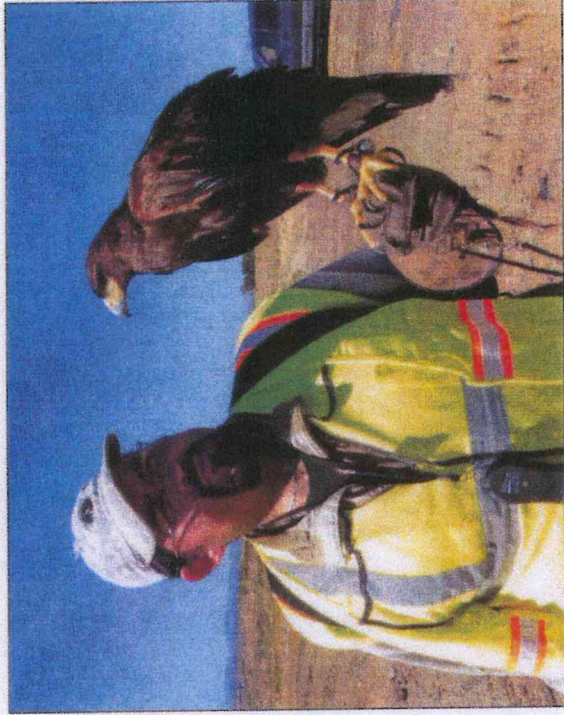
Since March, the MRWMD has contracted with a Turlock company to release falcons and other birds of prey to drive all but a few of the seagulls away.

Six days a week, beginning at 6:30 a.m. — seagull breakfast time — falconer Leonardo Velasquez arrives at the Marina site and releases one of his raptors, which flies over the hills of trash for 15 to 20 minutes at a time to scare the often brazen gulls away.

"The plan is to harass [the seagulls] and let them know we are serious," said Velasquez, who works for Wingmaster Falconry. "And let them know we don't want them here."

On Wednesday, Velasquez took four birds to the landfill, including Carmen, a 3-year-old Harris's hawk, and Penny, a 4-year-old peregrine/prairie falcon hybrid. While Carmen didn't chase the gulls during the morning session, her presence was enough to keep them away.

"Usually, as soon as the seagulls land, she will just go



PHOTO/KELLY NIX

This impressive Harris's hawk is one of several birds of prey used at the Marina landfill to keep away thousands of pesky seagulls. For years, the annoying gulls relied on the landfill as their source of food.

for them," Velasquez said.

The seagulls seem to have gotten the message loud and clear.

While as many as 10,000 seagulls used to visit the landfill each day, now there are only a few "scouts" that show up, according to Jeff Lindenthal, MRWMD public education and recycling manager.

"For a long time, seagulls were synonymous with our

See **BIRDS** page 16A

BIRDS

From page 1A

site," Lindenthal said.

Eliminating seagulls from the landfill is ironic, considering the Marina birds once had a bout of big screen stardom.

Some scenes in the 1973 movie "Jonathan Livingston Seagull," were filmed at the landfill. The onscreen bird flew around gracefully to an emotional soundtrack by Neil Diamond.

But Marina isn't Hollywood, and the gulls were a real problem at the landfill, officials said. "We have tried to be a good friend to Jonathan," Merry said, "But he has kind of worn out the welcome mat."

Flocks of gulls made it difficult for truck and bulldozer drivers to see what they were

doing, which posed a safety hazard.

They're also messy.

"They fly around the equipment and poop everywhere," Merry said.

Keeping the gulls away also encourages them to stick to their natural habitat and prevents them from ingesting something toxic or being run over by bulldozers.

"It's just been concluded that it's in the best interest of everybody to keep the seagulls away," Merry said.

But using birds of prey comes at a price. At about \$100,000 per year, it's a significant cost to the district.

"It's a large sum," Merry said. "We just felt that this was something we needed to do at this time."

The MRWMD has committed to using Wingmaster Falconry's service for at least one year, he said.

Nothing worked before

Landfill officials have tried a host of ways to get rid of seagulls, but nothing was very effective.

"Frankly, they are pretty darn smart and persistent," Merry said.

For the past five years, the MRWMD used a noise cannon to scare the scavenging birds. It worked a little, but the gulls became so accustomed to the device, they'd often perch on the barrel.

Before that, landfill workers tried filling the air with a bubble gum-like scent that was supposed to be repugnant to seagulls.

"That didn't work very well," Merry said. In addition to using raptors, Velasquez sets off pyrotechnic devices to scare the birds and sometimes releases his 10-month-old Vizsla, Tana, to chase after them. The dog never catches the seagulls.

Velasquez's black Nissan Xterra SUV, which he drives to the landfill each morning, is even a deterrent.

"When they see his truck, they fly away," Merry said.

To draw his hawk and falcons back, Velasquez whistles loudly and swings a tennis ball on a rope. When they fly back to his leather-clad arm, Velasquez hand feeds them quail meat as a reward.

The raptors are also fitted with radio telemetry so they can be found if they get distracted and go astray. A hand-held receiver beeps louder as the falconer gets closer to the lost bird.

Though gulls are now largely absent from the landfill, Velasquez said they would quickly make their way back if he stopped his efforts.

"If I turn my back on this place," he said, "they will come back."

It's believed it will take a few generations before seagulls learn the Marina landfill is no longer a place for food.

Using falcons and other raptors to get rid of avian pests is nothing new. Airports, farmers and wineries use them.

Eliminating a food source for seagulls also has its ugly consequences. Velasquez has noticed emaciated, starving birds. The craftier ones have likely found new food



PHOTO/ALBY NIX

Penny, a 4-year-old falcon, has what it takes to keep seagulls away from the Marina landfill elsewhere.

Still, Velasquez said using nature to fight nature is the best method of ridding the landfill of the pests.

"This is the most humane way," he said.

Popular with tours

The birds of prey have been a popular attraction with schoolchildren and other groups who regularly take tours of the site, Lindenthal said.

Velasquez usually puts a bird on his arm and brings it onto school buses so students can see the animal up close. "The falcons have really been a big hit," Lindenthal said.

But it's the landfill's vehicle operators who may appreciate the raptors more than anyone. "Formerly, it was hazardous just to get out of your truck," Lindenthal said. "There was a chance a seagull would drop something on you."