

## At Marina landfill, falconer battles foraging gulls

**Prey birds rein in hungry nuisance at Monterey Peninsula Landfill**

BY J. MICHAEL RIVERA • For The Salinas Californian • August 28, 2010

MARINA — A picturesque escarpment overlooking the precise spot where the Salinas River empties into the Pacific Ocean serves as an unintended buffet for enterprising seagulls.

The spot, at the Monterey Peninsula Landfill, is the final resting place for more than 197,000 tons of waste dumped from July 2009 to July 2010.

The postcard-worthy overlook was infested with legions of several gull species, who gave up hunting for meals in Monterey Bay to forage through garbage.

Until March 8, when a new boss flew into town.

The Monterey Regional Waste Management District, who oversees the landfill, hired a falconer to chase away freeloading gulls and divert them toward their natural food source.

"It has worked very well," said Jeff Lindenthal, public education and recycling manager for the Waste Management District. "It has surpassed our expectations."

The program has worked so well that the Monterey Regional Waste Management District intends to extend the program for three years before "weaning" themselves from it, said William Merry, general manager of the Waste Management District.

The \$160,000 yearly price tag for a falconer is considerable, especially during a budget crisis. But the decision came after years of consideration, said Merry.

"Money is the reason we didn't move to this in the past," Merry said. "We asked ourselves, 'Do you really want to move them that badly?'"

### Memorandum on bird use

The decision to use birds of prey came in a memorandum to the Waste Management District board in November 2009.

"Because of the significant nuisance condition for employees working at the landfill," the memorandum says, "the close proximity of agricultural land ... and the District's desire to be a good neighbor, the staff has concluded that it is time to become more aggressive in controlling the population of gulls at the landfill."

For decades, landfill workers had tried other ways to shoo away gulls. These included compacting trash; covering it with a tarp; and using noisemakers — cannons, whistles and pyrotechnics. But nothing deterred the gulls from a free meal.

Using birds of prey has worked so well that the gulls are rarely seen on the site. Small clusters of them still circle the landfill disposal site, but it will take time to condition scavenging birds to look elsewhere for food, said Leonardo Vazquez, a falconer for Wingmaster Falconry of Turlock.

As part of his assignment, Vazquez rotates a team of 10 birds of prey, including peregrine and prairie falcons, plus a Goshawk, a European species.

It could take up to three generations to condition gulls to keep away from the landfill, Vazquez said.



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William Merry, general manager of the Monterey Regional Waste Management District, inspects the waste disposal site for gulls on Aug. 11. Merry has worked for the district for 20 years. (j. michael Rivera)

Using birds of prey to chase away scavenging birds has many applications in the agricultural industry, said Robert Roach, assistant Monterey County agricultural commissioner.

"Falconry is enjoying a lot of interest these days," said Roach. Grape growers, he said, have used falconers for years to scare away birds that peck at ripening fruit.

When juice from one grape spills on the rest of the bunch, it rots the fruit.

"With all of the attention given to food safety, it's important to come up with preventative measures," Roach said. "The landfill has been very progressive and willing to try new things. They've been good to work with over the years."



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A Peruvian Aplomado falcon warns of gulls while on duty at the Monterey Peninsula Landfill Aug. 11. The Monterey Regional Waste Management District, which operates the landfill, has been using birds of prey since March 8 to chase away gulls from the landfill. (J. michael Rivera)



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Leonardo Vazquez, 33, guards the Monterey Peninsula Landfill with Carmen, a 2-year-old Harris falcon on Aug. 11. Vazquez, a falconer with Wingforce Falconry of Turlock, learned his trade as a 13-year-old boy in Mexico. (J. michael Rivera)

