

BY STEVEN D. GARBER



Falconry

Steven Garber and Friend

The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) recently ran a front-page article saying, “Falcons at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) are out of work.¹ From early May through September for 15 years, they’ve been swooping and stooping around the runways, scaring off gulls and geese that might otherwise get sucked into jet engines. This year the falcons won’t be flying. JFK has canceled their contract.”

Anyone who knows the history of bird control at airports in the United States would not be surprised. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey have a long history of doing what’s good for USDA instead of what’s good for the flying public.

WSJ further said that JFK was “the first and only commercial airport in the U.S. ever to try falconry. The idea was to teach the local birds nesting in the sanctuary that a flight over the airport fence might turn them into lunch for a bird of prey. ... That was before the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey’s latest budget crisis. Now JFK’s operator has cut short by a year its \$3 million, five-year contract” and instead is “negotiating (without bids) to award the job of banishing birds to USDA.

“The USDA doesn’t employ falcons. Its main technique for getting rid of birds from airports isn’t shooting but shooting — with shotguns.”

“Falconry is just expensive,” says Martin Lowney, director of USDA’s wildlife-control service for New York state. “Compared to falconry, shooting is more economical and more effective.” He’s wrong on both counts.

When I ran the falconry program at JFK, I did it for \$55,000 a year, not the \$600,000 per year the Port Authority implies with its five-year, \$3 million quote, and I made sure the falconers did a great job so we got more for our money.

After testing and showing how effective birds of prey are at helping to manage bird-related problems at airports, the Port Authority has made the mistake of listening to USDA and its inaccurate information. How can USDA say falconry is not effective and not cost effective? It clearly is both.

Much has been learned about airport falconry over the past 20 years; I was there from the beginning.

When done properly, nothing is as effective as old-fashioned labor-intensive bird control and harassment. Well-motivated and well-managed naturalists are brilliant at radically reducing the bird strike problems at the busiest airports. To do this properly, the bird strike problem

has to be fought all the time, and yes, it is possible to do so cost-effectively.

Advising the Port Authority on how to reduce its bird strike problem in 1988, researchers concluded, “It is important to maintain the pressure at all times. Otherwise, birds will return.”² In 1991, other researchers recommended “increased” and “continual” harassment patrols at JFK to reduce the bird strike problem.³

In 1992, after helping the Port Authority manage — some say mismanage — its bird strike problem for many years, USDA concluded, “The increasing numbers of bird strikes at JFK are clear evidence that standard bird control procedures conducted by the Bird Control Unit on the airport have not been effective in controlling the bird strike hazard.”

In 1994, when USDA wanted to take over the management of the U.S. bird strike problem, it publicly stated that falconry was “both technically unfeasible and ineffective.”

Because USDA had mismanaged the bird control situation at JFK, a federal judge forced the Port Authority to hire me to fix its bird strike problems. I started at the end of 1994, and, after reassessing everything the USDA said, I realized it was dead wrong about falconry.

About airport falconry, the USDA said, “Harassing ... gulls with falcons

Should Thrive

Birds of prey are effective in the campaign against gulls, geese and other birds near airports.

Shyamal and Susan Reed

would involve putting the gulls to flight frequently, thus increasing the potential for strikes during the harassment period. The flying falcons could themselves pose a hazard to aircraft. ... The presence of a large number of falcons in [JFK] airspace ... could present increased hazards to safe aircraft operations. The presence of falcons in or above the Jamaica Bay laughing gull colony [adjacent to the airport] could induce the gulls to [climb], thereby increasing the already high laughing gull-aircraft strike hazard.”⁴

USDA concluded, “The unreliable nature of [airport falconry] and the potential to increase the bird strike hazard make this alternative both technically unfeasible and ineffective. It is therefore no longer considered and not advanced for ... analysis.”

Contrary to what USDA said, I quickly found that airport falconry was legally, technically and economically feasible and effective.

Unfortunately, USDA never got with the program. And unfortunately, the FAA helped USDA create a near-monopoly on many important aspects of bird control at airports. At the Port Authority, USDA does not have to compete with outside bids, as the *WSJ* reported, and USDA does not practice falconry, so it couldn't compete anyway.

And yet, it has continued to undermine falconry with misleading and often inaccurate information.

Fifteen years ago, falconry was well on the way to being proven effective at reducing bird strikes. The falconry program, while I was in charge, was responsible for reducing bird strikes at JFK by more than 70 percent. This was in addition to the many bird strikes that were avoided by first eliminating many of the bird attractants in the area, including the landfills.

Data I presented at international conferences and in the International Civil Aviation Organization *Journal*⁵ showed that “trained birds of prey can reduce significantly the number of problem birds that visit.” We concluded, “Falconry, when implemented properly, holds tremendous promise as a means of bird control.”

This is what we learned at JFK: First, garbage attracts birds. When we caused three garbage dumps next to the airport to be shut down, a major bird attractant was eliminated, reducing the number of birds flying around and landing on JFK's grounds. As might be expected, the number of bird strikes declined precipitously.

Despite that success, the Port Authority has allowed a garbage facility to be installed next to La Guardia Airport,

despite law, regulations and intelligent reasoning (*ASW*, 10/09, p. 28).

And now, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has allowed its falconry program to be scrapped. Meanwhile, the Port Authority and USDA, with the help of the FAA, continue to allow bird control at airports to be poorly run and we, the industry as well as the flying public, are paying the price. 🦅

Steven D. Garber, M.B.A., Ph.D., runs the environmental consulting and contracting firm Worldwide Ecology, based in White Plains, New York, which specializes in environmental, safety, health, financial and legal issues related to aviation, biology, conservation, environment, park design and management, and green energy.

Notes

1. *Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2011.
2. Hanna/Olin Landscape Architects. “JFK Redevelopment Program, Investigational Studies, Bird Hazards.” December 1988. Philadelphia.
3. Griffin, C.R.; Hoopes, E.M. “Birds and the Potential for Birdstrikes at John F. Kennedy International Airport.” September 1991. Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
4. USDA. “Final Environmental Impact Statement, Gull Hazard Reduction Program, John F. Kennedy International Airport.” May 1994.
5. *ICAO Journal* Volume 51(7).