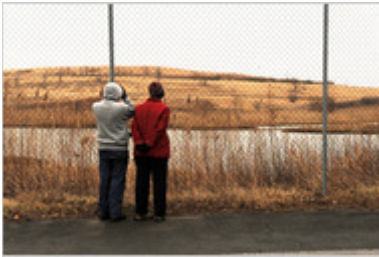


By JAMES BARRON  
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**“Do you see what I see?” Seth Wollney asked.**



Mary DiBiase Blaich for The New York Times

The New York City Parks Department offered a “Birding Tour” of the Fresh Kills Park in Staten Island on Sunday.



Mary DiBiase Blaich for The New York Times

“It’s actually not uncommon to have a large bird population on a former landfill site,” said Raj Kottamasu, a parks department manager. “A Good portion of the Meadowlands was landfill, and that’s a really popular site for bird-watching.”

The only thing a fledgling bird-watcher saw through his binoculars was a Boeing 757.

It turned out that six tiny meadowlarks, with their bright yellow feathers and necklace-like black markings around their throats, were on the ground, in a marshy stretch of what used to be the largest landfill in the world.

These days the Fresh Kills landfill is somewhere between its infamous, stinking past and its future as Freshkills Park, a 2,200-acre park with meadows and wetlands and a strange-looking name. The parks department, apparently hoping for a fresh start, is smashing the two words together and lower-casing the K. The project is expected to take decades, but the department hopes to have a small part open within the next few years.

Enter the bird-watchers, their high-powered binoculars and long-lens cameras around their necks, their illustrated reference guides in their pockets.

Every other month for the last year, the parks department has led birders through Freshkills. This explains why Mr. Wollney, a public programs associate from the [Staten Island Museum](#), was climbing a 150-foot mountain on Sunday morning, trailed by more than 20 others who had signed up for the tour.

The mountain was once a garbage pile. Now it has been sealed off with a plastic membrane and covered with a special kind of grass. Maybe on a clear day a Burton Lane-Alan Jay Lerner song would come to mind. Sunday, with blustery winds and a spitting sky, was not that day.

Still, in two hours the birders reported seeing everything from common mergansers to buffleheads, which one woman in the group said were behaving like bobblehead dolls. And Raj Kottamasu, a parks department manager who led the tour with two officials of the Staten Island Museum, said red-tailed hawk sightings were "pretty much guaranteed."

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Mary Eyster, a member of the Brooklyn Bird Club, said she had gone bird-watching in a handful of local landfills. At one, she saw five kinds of owls, including a Northern saw-whet.

Yes, a northern ... huh?

"There's one in Prospect Park," she said. "It's hard to tell from a pine cone. It's in a tree with pine cones." She said that her first sighting was with Peter Dorosh, the president of the Brooklyn Bird Club: "He said, 'There it is.' I said, 'That's a pine cone.' But it wasn't." (And, truth be told, the sharp-eyed Ms. Eyster had seen the meadowlarks on the mountain at Freshkills even before Mr. Wollney had.)

To the birders, Fresh Kills is not what it once was. "There used to be more birds when it was a dump," said Susan Fowler, an office administrator who lives in West New Brighton. "It used to be they could see a garbage pile from space. Now they'll see a park from space." (Mr. Wollney said later that the space-viewing was completely not true: "The Great Wall of China is not visible from space, either.")

Maybe not. But some of the birders said the population had diminished. Anne Purcell recalled going to Fresh Kills for the Christmas Bird Count, an avian census conducted from mid-December to early January each year. "The highest count, we had 100 red tails when the dump was still operating," Ms. Purcell said. "And the gull numbers were incredible."

"Upwards of 50,000 [great black back gulls](#)," said Edward Johnson, the director of science at the Staten Island Museum, who served as a spotter on the tour.

"Not seagulls," Ms. Purcell said. "People make that mistake."

Mr. Johnson nodded. "Now we only get in the hundreds, maybe the low thousands," he said. "We closed down their food sources."

The tour began at the Eltingville Transit Center, a park-and-ride bus station about a mile and a half (as the [you-know-what](#) flies) from the entrance to Fresh Kills. The parks department provided a 24-seat bus,

but before it pulled out, there was paperwork. Everyone had to sign a form promising not to hold the Sanitation Department responsible for injuries or death at the landfill. “It’s the standard Department of Sanitation waiver for a construction site,” Mr. Kottamasu explained. “The half that’s not under construction is where we’re going.”

He also explained about the bathrooms. There are none at Fresh Kills — yet. An environmentally friendly comfort station is on the drawing board. Mr. Kottamasu advised birders to use the restrooms in the transit center.

On the way to Fresh Kills, the bus passed an area called Owl Hollow, which Mr. Kottamasu said would be the first part of the transformation to Freshkills. No owls were seen. “I’m not sure why it’s called Owl Hollow,” Mr. Kottamasu said.

Soon the bus was at the gate to Fresh Kills, and a moment later Mr. Johnson was telling the driver to hit the brakes. “There’s a red-tailed hawk in a tree right there,” he said.

The birders in the bus oohed and ahed. The hawk responded by taking off. Soon it was making lazy circles in the sky, 22 miles from Broadway and 1,235 miles from Oklahoma.

“You always hear about the family on Fifth Avenue,” said Sheila Swigert, a retired teacher from St. George. “They make films and they protest. These out here in the forgotten borough. ...” Her voice trailed off.

Ms. Purcell recalled seeing a [barn owl](#) perched in a crane on one of her earlier trips to Fresh Kills. Not a feathery crane, but the big blue metal kind that was once the workhorse of the Sanitation Department fleet, with big jaws that scooped the trash from garbage barges and dumped it in the landfill. Toward the end of the tour the bus passed a row of them, standing silent.

The birders visited two of Fresh Kills’ four peaks: North Mound, which will be called North Park once Freshkills opens as a park, and South Mound, which will become South Park.

“I was waiting for the ‘South Park’ reference,” Ms. Purcell said, struggling to remember the names of the characters on the long-running [Comedy Central series](#).

Of the two, North Mound is taller, at 150 feet, Mr. Kottamasu said. As the birders reached the top, he was talking about a viewing platform the parks department plans to build for birders, overlooking an adjacent wildlife refuge on land that was never part of the landfill.

And Mr. Wollney was talking about a scientific paper he had read about “people who were here 12,000 years ago” — back in the pre-garbage age.