

# Falcons drop in, gulls flee

## Birds of prey chase landfill pests away

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Seagulls are a nuisance at Brady Road, but the raptor program has cut them to 400.

WINNIPEG — Where 4,500 gulls used to interfere with workers at the Brady Road landfill, even defecating on them and their bulldozers, only 400 remain, thanks to the work of a team of falcons and hawks.

Even those few hundred brave gulls that have stuck around rise up en masse and flee when they see Sabaa, one of the falcons, flying around.



*PHOTOS BY BORIS MINKEVICH / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS*

*A falcon perches on trainer Bryony Griffiths' glove at the Brady Road landfill.*

Kevyn Vossen, a trainer, releases Sabaa from the glove on his right hand from more than 200 metres away. She's only a blip in the turquoise sky, but seagulls have keen vision, and as soon as Bell, another falcon, is in the air, they become like sheep, white wings receding toward the horizon. Within minutes, most gulls are out of sight completely.

As for Bell, she's not even hunting today, Vossen says. She's quite happy to stretch her wings a bit and then come down for a snack, a whole quail that he offers.

The company that raises the raptors, called Pacific Northwest Raptors in British Columbia, raises the quails for falcon and hawk food.

These raptors fly in short spurts. "They're essentially sprinting all the time they're flying," says Bryony Griffiths, one of five trainers who look after the nine birds. But they're in and out of the air from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, which means the seagulls can't stick around long.

Vossen says that for several weeks, they had the gulls down to about 100 before the numbers crept back up a little.

Winnipeg quietly introduced the gull-control program a month ago after trials last year. It costs the city about \$150,000 a year for protection from April to September but saves waste workers huge hassle.

Jeff Hawley, the supervisor of disposal at the landfill, says dealing with the gulls was a "pretty unpleasant experience." They carry disease and can lift garbage out of the landfill and drop it in neighbouring fields.

Gull-control programs using raptors are common across North America, Hawley says, with Victoria, Vancouver and Calgary notable examples.

Vossen and Griffiths are young -- Griffiths is only 22 -- and out in Winnipeg for the summer from their homes in B.C.

They both say they like the job and love the birds, but there are a few downsides.

"It's not an ideal environment," Vossen says. The stench of rot wafts through the landfill. "When it's wet, the smell percolates up and it's just horrible," he says. But most days, they're able to ignore the smell.

The scratches that mark their arms -- even the face of one trainer -- are less a concern.

"It's like a razor blade -- it just punctures in and out -- and you've got stories to tell. You never get huge gashes," Vossen says.

After a shift, Bell rests on Griffiths' hand outside the little house the bird lives in when she's not on duty. She has been raised by humans since birth, so she's particularly fond of them. Griffiths strokes her talons and feathers.

"She prefers to be outside with me than inside," Griffiths says.

As for the thousands of seagulls that used to disturb the landfill's peace, Vossen says they've gone to safer feeding grounds.