

Disposal Road is a birding hotspot

BY JIM WRIGHT

New Jersey Meadowlands
Commission

Where is the best place to watch birds in the Meadowlands?

For many people, several spots managed by the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission come to mind—from Mill Creek Marsh in Secaucus to DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst to the Kearny Marsh.

But for the past few months, a little-known byway named Disposal Road just might hold the crown.

The two-lane Disposal Road got its name because it once provided garbage-truck access to the Erie and Kingsland landfills. It now connects Schuyler Avenue in North Arlington and the end of Valley Brook Avenue in Lyndhurst.

The narrow road also leads to the AMVETS carillon, DeKorte Park's Saw Mill Creek Trail, a methane-recovery plant and a PSE&G substation.

The Disposal Road birding bonanza began with a Northern Shrike, a rare predatory songbird that flew in from the Arctic in mid-December. It has been feasting on mice and small birds ever since.

Bird-watchers flocked to see the shrike, but because the bird can disappear for hours or days on end, they spent a lot of time scanning both sides of the road with their binoculars—and spotting dozens of other great bird species as well.

The reason is simple.

"Disposal Road is a great place to see birds because of all different habitats that surround the road," says Meadowlands Commission Naturalist Michael Newhouse.



JIM WRIGHT/NJMC

Northern Harrier near Disposal Road.

"You'll find meadow, shrub, barren land and water on either side of the road."

Newhouse says the road is especially good for watching hawks: "The nearby landfills provide an abundance of food for small birds, and mice are also attracted to the area—which in return attracts raptors."

Consider this list of raptors that have been seen from Disposal Road since mid-December: bald eagle, great horned owl, rough-legged hawk, red-shouldered hawk, northern harrier (including the rare and striking male, a.k.a. "the Gray Ghost"), Cooper's hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, merlin, kestrel, peregrine falcon, osprey, turkey vulture and the ubiquitous red-tailed hawk.

For those of you keeping score at home, that's an amazing 13 species of raptors.

Because two of DeKorte Park's tidal impoundments abut the road, the birders have also seen a slew of ducks—northern shovelers, northern pintails, gadwalls, rud-

dies, buffleheads and common mergansers.

Also seen: the rare snow bunting, ring-necked pheasant (virtually non-existent outside of the Meadowlands in North Jersey), the first Meadowlands killdeer of the spring, and—just last week—the first tree swallow and greater yellowlegs of the season.

Just when I thought had seen it all on Disposal Road, I got perhaps the biggest surprise of all earlier this month.

As I was driving down the road at dusk, I watched in awe as a big and beautiful coyote ambled across the roadway.

It was a wily one at that. Of course, my camera was in the trunk.

NJMC Communications Officer Jim Wright maintains the Commission's daily nature blog, meadowblog.net - featuring beautiful photography and the latest info on the region's abundant natural wonders.