

In the valley of the birds



PHOTO BY JIM WRIGHT/NJMC

By John Soltes
EDITOR IN CHIEF

NORTH ARLINGTON — Like an impossible valley, sunken between the Erie and I-E landfills in North Arlington, Harrier Meadow is a 70-acre expanse of land that is quite the avian paradise. The area, closed to the public for most of the year, is a Shangri-la for hawks, ducks and other fowl to fly, dive and perch without the interruption of dog walkers, construction vehicles or youthful meanderers.

But birding enthusiasts are not completely shut out.

The New Jersey Meadowlands Commission, the state agency that preserved Harrier Meadow and retains zoning authority of the tract, helps lead bird walks through the area with the Bergen County Audubon Society on the third Tuesday of the month (the next one is April 20 at 10 a.m.). However, on Sunday, April 11, weekenders will have the chance to take in the meadow on a special two-hour nature walk at 10 a.m.

Because participants technically walk over a landfill on their way to the meadow, the signing of a standard liability release form is required.

On a recent morning, when the sun was losing its chess match with the clouds overhead, NJMC Communications Officer Jim Wright led *The Leader* on an exclusive tour of Harrier Meadow.

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To peek at the flora and fauna, wooden "blinds" are set up around the meadow with rectangular holes missing for enthusiast's elongated spectacles. The mini barns offer views of the preserved foreground and the metropolitan background (midtown and downtown Manhattan, plus the bustling New Jersey Turnpike are easy reference points).

Mike Newhouse, an NJMC naturalist, said the meadow is a special place because it's a secluded retreat. "The birds don't get disturbed too much," he said. "So they concentrate there."

The species of birds in Harrier runs the gamut, from red-tailed hawks to mallard ducks. Although not in the meadow itself, Wright even spotted two bald eagles recently near the NJMC's headquarters in Lyndhurst. It wouldn't be hard to imagine America's symbol dipping its head into the shallow puddle of a Harrier Meadow mudflat for a quick lunch of North Arlington sushi.

There are more than 270 species of birds throughout the Meadowlands District, which includes portions of 14 municipalities. The Commission is dedicated to acquiring open space and conserving as many acres of wetlands as it can. To date, the NJMC has been able to preserve 3,600 acres.

Harrier Meadow is one case study of this initiative. Other recent examples include 35 acres in Secaucus known as "Hawk Property" and River Barge Park and Marina in Carlstadt.

Harrier, this land between the landfills, used to be a "marsh that was primarily phragmites, and the water flow was very restricted," Newhouse said. "It was then cleared and they increased the tidal flow and made more native plants. Right now, the diversity of habitat in that marsh is substantial."

With the preservation comes a consequential improvement in the habitats

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"This is kind of like a bed-and-breakfast," said Wright, who often leads the bird walks and also runs the Meadowlands Nature Blog (meadowblog.net). "Some birds come and others go. Some birds even stay for the season."

While driving on the well-maintained paths in the meadow, Wright had a pair of binoculars and a long-lens camera at the ready. "Sometimes being in the car is the best way to see them," he said.

As the NJMC vehicle made its way slowly through the terrain, almost like the introduction to Jurassic Park, Wright leaned out the window and spotted some of his newfound friends. "That's a killdeer," he said with a laugh. "That's a ... (pause) ... cooper's hawk." "We just missed a northern harrier."

Harrier Meadow took a beating from the recent storm and hellish winter. Flotsam and jetsam, including a tangled piece of foam, were scattered sparingly around the meadow's mudflats. A couple of ducks used submerged tires as makeshift diving boards. One lazy turtle stretched its neck skyward as it clung to a buoy.

In the warmer months, dragonflies become mini helicopters, landing and taking off the floral airstrips.



PHOTO OF COOPER'S HAWK BY JIM WRIGHT/NJMC

for animals and fish as well.

"The NJMC's commitment to open space preservation has been critical to maximizing the quality of life in the Meadowlands District," said NJMC Executive Director Robert Ceberio.

At the end of the private tour, Wright spotted two muskrats — one alive and scurrying to his protective hole in the ground, and the other long gone with only a broken skeleton serving as evidence of his existence.

As the sun reached its high point in the sky, still losing that game of chess, Wright locked the chain-link fence that separates the wilds of South Bergen from the wilds of Harrier Meadow.

Although the padlocked entry point on Disposal Road seemed an impassible divide, one uppity killdeer had no problem passing to and fro — from paradisiacal to pedestrian.

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