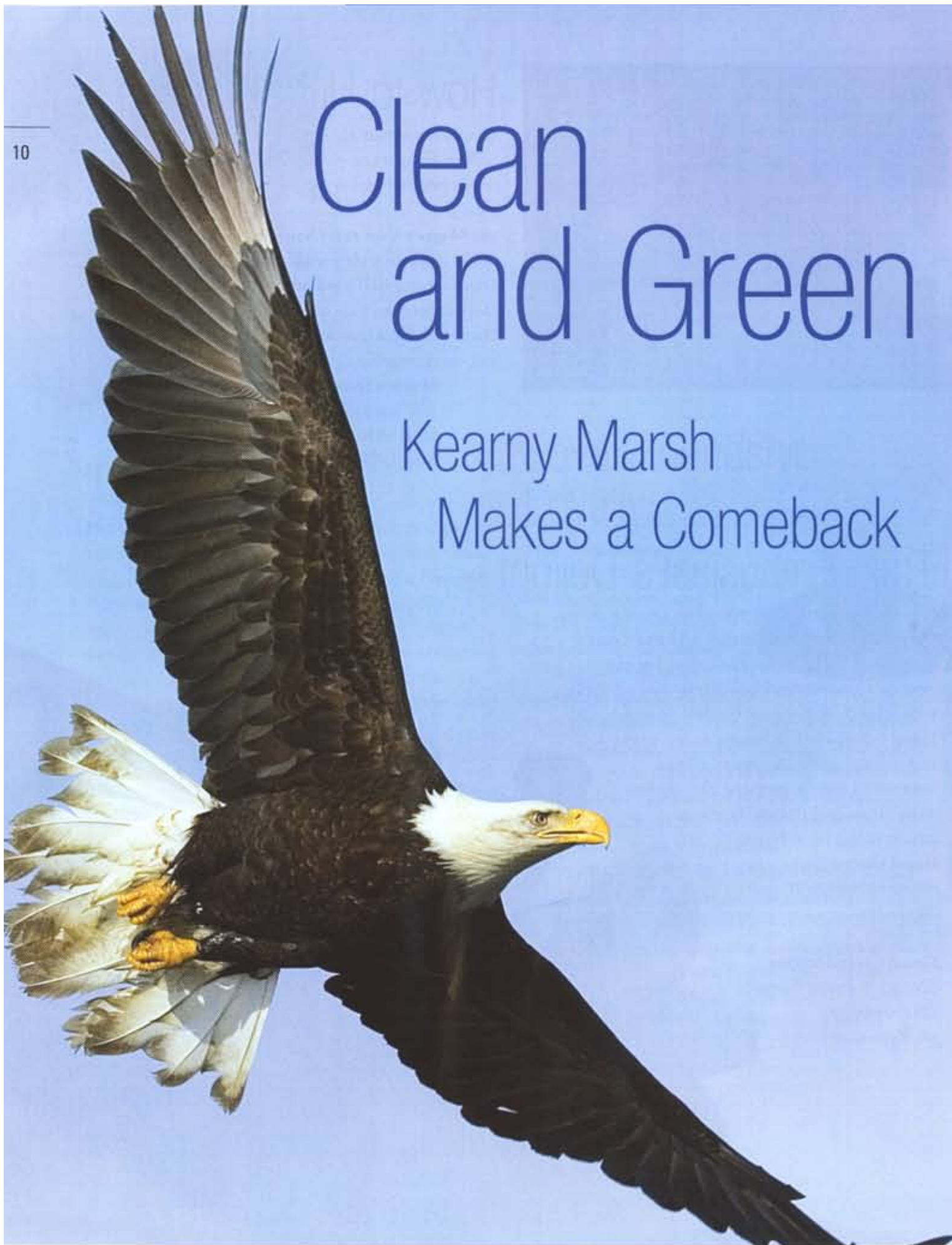


# Clean and Green

## Kearny Marsh Makes a Comeback



Once the nation's poster child for everything in nature that had become endangered as a result of man's careless disregard for the environment, the bald eagle is making a comeback. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now estimates there are 9,000 or more bald eagles living in the American wild. That includes the Kearny Marsh, where birders, naturalists and environmentalists have reported sightings of the formerly endangered species that was nearly eliminated by DDT and other pesticides.

### An endangered species returns

The return of bald eagles is just one sign that the Kearny Marsh has gotten cleaner and greener thanks to a dedicated coalition of government agencies, environmental groups and individuals who have worked tirelessly to improve the health of this 400-acre urban oasis. The only freshwater marsh in the Meadowlands District and a stopping ground along the Atlantic Flyway for birds like the bald eagle and osprey, the marsh had once been considered as fragile as the birds it now supports with a ready supply of blue claw crabs.

"What I've found there is nothing short of spectacular," said Kearny resident Ronald Shields, a birding enthusiast who has photographed various species extensively from his kayak in the marsh. "The marsh is very vibrant. I always see something new. It gives you a whole new perspective on where you are."

For decades, the marsh had been a forgotten waterway, the victim of industrial pollution that plagues many waterways in New Jersey's urban centers. A key culprit in the degradation of the Kearny Marsh was the Keegan Landfill, a Bergen Avenue dump adjoining the marsh. Toxic chemicals illegally dumped at the orphaned landfill had leached into the marsh, nearly destroying the ecosystem. The New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (NJMC) estimates that up to 200,000 gallons of the toxic stew had seeped into the marsh each day.

Now, a collaborative effort by the Town of Kearny and the NJMC to remediate the marsh is bearing fruit.



Top to bottom: Monarch butterfly, photo by Ronald Shields; paddlers in the Kearny Marsh; least bittern, photo by Ronald Shields; glossy ibis, photo by Ronald Shields. Left: The bald eagle, once an endangered species, has been spotted in the Kearny Marsh.



Above: Canoeers in the Kearny Marsh, the only freshwater marsh in the Meadowlands; Black skimmer, photo by Ronald Shields.

It's really a great treasure and if managed correctly, is a wonderful resource that generations to come can enjoy."

— Ronald Shields

The NJMC has invested more than \$25 million into the project so far to build a slurry wall around the landfill to contain the leachate in canals that cannot reach the marsh.

Once contained, the leachate is pumped to a Newark treatment facility for cleanup. Jim Wright, a spokesman for the NJMC, said the agency has collected more than 75 million gallons of the contaminated liquid.

On Jan. 2, 2010, the NJMC reopened the Keegan Landfill to accept only construction, industrial and demolition waste to cap the contaminated soil beneath. Future plans for the site include a passive park and recreational area that will be turned over to the town.

The NJMC has also spearheaded other cleanup efforts in the area, including a one-day event earlier this year that drew more than 40 volunteers from the Bergen County Audubon Society and the Northern New Jersey Cachers, as well as locals, who worked on foot and in canoes to remove trash, tires and other junk from the marsh and a hiking trail located on the eastern border of Gunnell Oval.

The two birding groups have a vested interest in the health of the marsh and hiking trail, since they're hotspots for birding in northern New Jersey. In fact, participants in this year's World Series of Birding sponsored by the New Jersey Audubon Society camped out there for 24-hour stints to catalogue the many species that stopped in on the migratory route.

#### What you'll see in the Kearny Marsh

Shields has seen a wide variety of species, from bald eagles to red-tailed hawks and osprey, another once-endangered species that in the past few years has nested

in the Meadowlands area. He has also noted sightings of rare birds, including the glossy ibis and least bittern, a secretive bird that is often hard to spot.

"It's nice to see that the Kearny Marsh survived all these years," said Shields, who is principal of nearby Harrison High School. "You can see the extent of the work that's been done on the Keegan Landfill. I'm not a scientist, but you can see it has attracted a whole bunch of species to the area."

Wright said the Kearny Marsh is also home to black skimmers, with American coots plentiful during the winter months.

"The skimmers are spectacular birds," said Wright, whose blog, [www.meadowblog.net](http://www.meadowblog.net), has frequent updates about nature in the area. "They have large bills, similar to a pelican's, and they use the lower part of their bills to skim the water for food."

With a drought threatening last summer, mudflats at the marsh were exposed, revealing the remnants of a 19th century white cedar forest that once thrived in the area. Legend has it that sometime around 1800 authorities burned the forest to flush out pirates who hid there after raiding boats in New York Harbor.

The lower water table last summer also attracted a number of shore and wading birds, like the great blue heron and black crown night heron.

Shields hopes others take advantage of the Kearny Marsh. "Even from the walking trail you can see all this great wildlife that's right here in our backyard," he said. "It's really a great treasure and if managed correctly is a wonderful resource that generations to come can enjoy."

## Kearny Makes a Splash at Second Annual Canoe Race

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Kearny residents are re-discovering the beauty of the Passaic River, thanks to an annual canoe race co-sponsored by the town's Recreation Department and the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners (PVSC).

The second annual event, which was held last summer, attracted more than 20 participants, who took in the serenity of the river along the nearly two-mile route.

"It was so peaceful and serene," said Kearny resident Katherine Grusenski, whose daughter and husband participated in last year's race. "This is all about the preservation of the waterfront."

The PVSC provided the town with 11 canoes for the race, which featured trophies for the top three finishing canoes. While they didn't win a trophy, Mayor Alberto G. Santos and Fourth Ward Councilman Michael Landy teamed up to enter the competition.

"It was my first time out on the Passaic for recreational purposes," commented Mayor Santos. "You really get a whole different perspective of Kearny from the river."

For years, the Passaic River's reputation was that of a troubled waterway as a result of nearly a century of industrial pollution. Following the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972 prohibiting the discharge of industrial waste into waterways like the Passaic, the local river began its own natural cleanup process.

It has received some help along the way from Kearny town officials and community service groups, who sponsor a Passaic River cleanup every spring. The PVSC has also lent a hand by providing two skimmer vessels to pluck waste from the river, as well as spearheading restoration projects.

"I think with the passage of the Clean Water Act, the river began to heal itself," said Thomas Pietrykoski, an assistant scientist with the PVSC, noting that the commission has removed more than 8,000 tons of debris from the river since 1998. "The river is perfect for recreational use, but there's a perception that it's not. We're trying to break that down and look toward a brighter future for the Passaic."