

Birders flock to Meadowlands

Cloudy weather doesn't keep away avid avian enthusiasts

By Colleen Reynolds
REPORTER

Egrets often like to wade under bridges in the Meadowlands so as not to cast shadows that would alert tasty fish of their presence. The fish may not notice the birds, but they were certainly spotted by the gaggle of binocular-clad birdwatchers who flocked to the sixth-annual New Jersey Meadowlands Festival of Birding Sept. 12 and 13.

The event, organized by the New Jersey Audubon Society and Hackensack Riverkeeper and hosted and sponsored by the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission, drew a number of New York license plates as well as vanity New Jersey plates featuring birds, despite the elephant-gray weather. But then again, birds of a feather flock together.

Some birders traveled quite a distance. Bill Barrett, for example, lives in Kansas City, but grew up in



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Newark. "When I heard of this festival I had to come see it," said Barrett, who was also in the area for a family reunion.

Before moving out of North Jersey in the early 1960s, "what I heard about the Meadowlands was 'don't go there; the rats will eat you alive,'" he recalled. After a Sept. 12 cruise on the Hackensack River with Capt. Bill Sheehan, the executive director of the Hackensack Riverkeeper, Barrett gushed, "I was delightfully surprised. To see a bald eagle this close to New York City, wow!"

Bald eagles, while still rare, are gradually becoming more common, as are species of many different feathers. Greater populations of birds — which keep mosquito and other insect populations in check — reflect the improved water quality of the river. Sheehan noted that 30 to 40 years ago, the Hackensack was one of the country's most polluted waterways, home to mostly carp and eels. Now, there is a greater effort at curbing pollution, and at least 65 marine species live in the river. "Predatory birds know they can come here and get a good meal," Sheehan said. Plans to cultivate oyster reefs in the water would provide another food source.

At the festival, countless avian species could be seen enjoying or searching for meals in the Meadowlands, a cardinal stop along the Atlantic Flyway. During low tides, the freshly revealed mudflats — platters of worms and mollusks — serve as vital feeding ground for migratory birds, especially shorebirds like sandpipers, providing them with energy to resume their migrations.

Double-crested cormorants dive underwater and can outswim their prey. The waterfowl then rest atop pilings to dry off and digest their seafood. Ospreys, at least five of which were born in the Meadowlands this spring, prefer building waterside nests so they can keep watchful eyes on their food.

Peregrine falcons — rare, yet majestic

raptors that can reach speeds of 200 mph — are also experiencing a resurgence and are ferocious hunters. "Peregrine falcons love pigeons," explained Sheehan while scouring their sub-highway nests for a sighting. "In fact, there aren't a lot of pigeons anymore." On a return trip, Sheehan spotted several of the predators, to the delight of the birders.

In the Meadowlands, great blue herons, red-tailed hawks, black-and-white warblers, belted kingfishers and greater yellowlegs thrive and are just a sampling of what was spotted in one day.

As the autumnal equinox approaches, more ducks will arrive, and different species will be visible and audible for people to enjoy.

Former Lyndhurst resident Wakako Matsushita, who now lives in New York, returned to the Meadowlands for the festival because she cherishes the wetlands so much. "I wish people in the city knew this place," she said. "There's a lot to offer here."

In addition to the Hackensack River pontoon-boat tours, the festival included bird-banding demonstrations and walks at Harrier Meadow, a wetlands enhancement site usually closed to the public; birdwatching walks through Lyndhurst's Richard W. DeKorte Park and Secaucus's Mill Creek Marsh; avian-related workshops; paddling trips at Laurel Hill County Park and Mill Creek Point Park in Secaucus; field trips to Liberty State Park in Jersey City and the Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale and a Palisades hawk watch at State Line Lookout in Alpine.

For more information on local nature programs visit www.njaudubon.com, www.hackensack-riverkeeper.org or www.meadowlands.state.nj.us.