

# A Raptor Solution to Vectors



*Joe Suffredini and “Elmo” prepare for another flight at the Simi Valley Landfill. The very presence of the raptors is more effective than traditional means — gun blasts, horns or owl-shaped balloons — at making seagulls think twice about lingering on the trash heap.*

Sometimes you can reach back centuries to find a solution to a very modern problem.

Landfills are a reality of our times and our lifestyles. It's unlikely we, as a society, will adopt habits and make consumer choices that will render garbage dumps entirely unnecessary — at least not any time soon. No matter how “green” we live, we are all likely to roll a garbage can to the curb sooner or later. And we expect that trash to disappear from our lives. Out of sight and out of mind.

Landfills are, by their very nature, smelly places. All those bits of leftover food and organic matter dropped in garbage cans eventually find their way onto the heap. And that's a dinner bell for what are euphemistically called “vectors” — rats, mice pigeons, seagulls and other scavengers looking for an easy meal. Especially seagulls.

There's always a risk that those scavengers can catch diseases and spread them to the world at large. That's where Joe Suffredini and his birds of prey come in.

Falconry was once a sport of noblemen with a heritage that goes back perhaps two millennia. The art of raising a chick from egg to adulthood — imprinting the bird of prey to trust its human master and do his bidding — remains a complex and time-consuming skill.

Suffredini is one of those rare individuals keeping the sport alive in the 21st century. He's also helping to keep trash and all that comes with it in the landfill where it belongs.

Suffredini's birds are serious-looking, captive-bred Lanner and Saker falcons with serious names like Grave Digger... and not-so-serious names like Elmo, Paris and Nicole. Several days a week, he brings them to the Simi Valley Landfill. It's a medium-sized facility a stone's throw from the Ronald Reagan Library, operated by Waste Management Inc., the nation's largest trash hauler.

When Suffredini puts his birds to work, you have to keep your eyes on them or you can miss the show completely. He gently takes Elmo from his perch in the back of a pickup truck with a stout leather glove and walks him closer to the edge of the active landfill. Elmo seems not to notice the smells, the dust, the huge tractors like elephants with spiked wheels to better compact the trash being laid down just yards away.

With a whistle signal from his master, Elmo takes flight and nearly disappears in a blur of speed and agility. He orbits a leather lure Suffredini swings in a circle, as he's trained to do. Elmo isn't here to kill seagulls — he's here to scare the bejeezus out of them. It works.

Word travels fast in seagull circles that there's a raptor in town, and by the time Suffredini calls Elmo back to perch on his leather glove, there's not a seagull to be seen anywhere near the active patch of landfill. All in a day's work.

“Seagulls know they're the prey, so they take off — it's like a shark in the water,” Suffredini says with a wry smile.

Waste Management tried a number of methods for vector control over the years. Blank gun blasts, whistles and balloons that look like raptors only work for a while before the seagulls start to ignore them. Suffredini's crew of raptors, on the other hand, never fail to make an impression. So, about six years ago, the company returned to nature... to control nature.