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SHOOTING GULLS AT JFK INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT REDUCES STRIKES WITH AIRCRAFT

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Abstract: The collision of birds with aircraft is a serious problem at John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFKIA), New York City. Laughing gulls comprised 52% of the bird strikes from 1988-1990, averaging 156 aircraft strikes/year. This species is present from May-September in association with a 7,600-nest colony (1990) adjacent to the airport. Other gulls (herring, great black-backed, and ring-billed), present year-round, comprised 35% of the strikes. Another 52 species of birds comprised the remaining 13% of strikes.

An active bird management program at JFKIA has involved habitat alteration and use of bird-frightening techniques to discourage birds from feeding, drinking, and loafing on airport grounds. However, these measures did little to prevent gulls from flying over the airport to other feeding sites.

An experiment to reduce gull strikes by aircraft was undertaken in 1991-1993 in which 2-5 people with shotguns stationed on airport boundaries shot gulls flying over the airport from mid-May to early August. Shooters killed 26,038 laughing gulls and 2,314 other gulls flying over the airport during 2,206 person-hours of shooting in 1991 and 1992. The shooting program at JFKIA substantially reduced the number of strikes between all species of gulls and aircraft, by 70% in 1991 and 89% in 1992 relative to the previous 3 years.

The laughing gull nesting colony in its present location continues to present an unacceptable hazard to aircraft. The shooting program, although effective in reducing the number of gulls struck by aircraft, has not significantly reduced the size of the nesting colony. The colony still contained about 6,000 nests in 1993. Laughing gulls continue to immigrate to the Jamaica Bay colony from expanding populations in New Jersey and elsewhere, replacing the shot gulls. A long-term solution that will avoid the yearly shooting program is to relocate or disperse the colony from Jamaica Bay. However, the interim shooting program should continue on the airport to minimize the number of gull strikes until the laughing gull colony is dispersed from Jamaica Bay.