

Renovation at Javits Center Alleviates Hazard for Manhattan's Birds

By Lisa W. Foderaro

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For years the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center loomed over a desolate stretch of the West 30s in Manhattan, its dark facade and severe angles earning it the nickname Darth Vader. For bird lovers, the appellation was apt since the building was a major site of bird fatalities, as the unwitting creatures smashed into the mirrorlike facade.

Now, after a half-billion-dollar renovation, the convention center has gone from being one of the deadliest buildings for birds in New York City to perhaps the most hospitable.

New glass panels imprinted with patterns have cut bird deaths by 90 percent, while the center's new green roof — the second largest in the United States with more than six acres of sedum, a hardy ground cover — has attracted almost a dozen species of birds, as well as five species of bats. There have even been gull chicks.

"I think it's a surprise," said Alan Steel, president and chief executive officer of the Javits Convention Center, strolling across the greensward that sprawls over the roof. "People don't generally expect to see something like this. We're a convention center, and our main purpose is economic impact. But that doesn't mean it has to be the only thing we do."

There are other benefits. The green roof and new glass panels, which are covered with tiny dots, called "fritting," have naturally cooled the building. Those and other improvements have reduced energy consumption by 26 percent. The green roof also captures rainwater, helping to slow the discharge of raw sewage into waterways, which happens when treatment plants are inundated by storm water.

The five-year renovation, completed last year, was undertaken by FXFowle Architects, whose founding principal, Bruce Fowle, is a birding enthusiast. (His wife, Marcia T. Fowle, sits on the board of directors at New York City Audubon, a group that tracks the incidence of bird collisions.)



Pigeons on the new green roof of the Javits Convention Center. Pablo Enriquez for The New York Times

Mr. Fowle said New York State, which oversees the convention center, did not necessarily wish to spend extra money only on bird protection. But the same features that made the building more economical and environmentally sensitive had the bonus of nurturing wildlife.

His firm decided to replace the glass facade with a combination of stainless-steel panels and large windows. Mr. Fowle looked for glass that would let in more light without creating glare inside the center. He also sought to reduce the facade's reflectivity.

"We wanted to make sure that we solved the bird problem," he said.

His team studied 15 glass products with "different coatings and transparencies and dot patterns," he said. The final choice was a glass panel sprinkled with small white dots, perceptible by people only upon close examination.

For the birds, however, the dot pattern is more obvious.

Since the late 1990s, New York City Audubon has dispatched volunteers to count dead birds at the base of buildings like the World Financial Center, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Time Warner Center and the Javits center — structures notorious for confusing birds.

Nationwide, scientists estimate that hundreds of millions of birds are killed each year by crashing into houses and buildings. The Javits center alone was responsible for the deaths of scores of birds annually.

“The Javits center used to be one of the big bird killers,” Susan B. Elbin, the director of conservation and science for New York City Audubon, said.

The local Audubon group is now studying bird and bat life on the green roof, along with insects — an important food source. So far, 11 bird species have been spotted. Among them are pigeons, of course, and the ubiquitous house sparrow, but also Northern mockingbirds, American kestrels (a colorful falcon), great black-backed gulls and herring gulls.



A herring gull chick on the green roof. Debra Kriensky, NYC Audubon

The herring gulls have even started to nest. Twelve nests were counted on the sedum this year, up from six the year before.

“Herring gulls nest on the Farley Building,” Dr. Elbin said, referring to the James A. Farley Post Office opposite Pennsylvania Station. “But the neat thing about this is it’s the first time that we’re aware of that herring gulls have started up a colony on a green roof.”

In addition, a pair of Canada geese this spring built a nest and hatched several goslings. Unfortunately, the goslings saw the river in the distance, but did not detect the roof’s edge. They waddled off and plunged to the pavement below. Somehow they survived.

“They tumbled, but luckily they were still very fluffy,” said Dr. Elbin, adding that the goslings were taken to a wildlife rehabilitator near Central Park.

To encourage more nesting, Audubon provided two American kestrel boxes in a shade of taxicab yellow. And the group has mounted an ultrasonic acoustic recording unit — essentially a microphone — to detect bat sounds. Five of the nine possible bat species in the state have been recorded over the Javits roof: Eastern red bat, big brown bat, hoary bat, silver-haired bat and tricolored bat.

For Mr. Steel, who grew up bird watching in the north of England, the bird-friendly measures could help push the Javits Convention Center closer to a coveted LEED certification. The U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit industry group, introduced a bird-safety credit as part of its prized certification, which stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Now, it seems, the Javits center cannot do enough in the name of sustainability. Currently adorning its green roof are solar panels, two weather stations (courtesy of Drexel University) and three bee hives. “We’re looking forward to Javits honey,” Mr. Steel said. “That’s the goal.”