

Del. composting facility employs ‘dogged’ tactics

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There are many people employees at the Wilmington Organics Recycling Center, Peninsula Composting Group’s Wilmington, Del., facility. But none of them can quite measure up to Cooper in terms of popularity and affection.

“We have several tour groups come through every week,” said Nelson Widell, marketing and sales director, who co-founded the company with managing director Charles Gifford. “Everyone wants to stop at Cooper’s area and hear his story. Then he comes running up and licks your face.”

Cooper, a young, outgoing border collie, was imported from Toronto and specially trained to keep seagulls away from the composting facility.

“It was a natural solution to a natural problem,” Widell said.

The composting facility, which accepts food waste for recycling in an enclosed building and then sends processed waste outside in Gore fabric covered windrows, is located about a mile — as the gull flies — from Delaware’s Cherry Island Landfill.

“Seagulls have lived at the landfill for generations,” Widell said. “But even though we sort the food waste inside and the windrows are covered, they somehow knew we had food here.”

In a matter of weeks, the newly opened composter was invaded by thousands of seagulls. They perched on the Gore fabric windrows, in the parking lot, and on the buildings, making a nuisance of themselves and leaving droppings everywhere.

The company began casting about for ideas to drive the birds away. There are several products and systems on the market purported to drive away feathered pests. Companies advertise acoustic cannons; balloons with large eyes painted on them that are supposed to give smaller birds second thoughts about swooping in; gunlike products called “avian dissuaders”; and chemicals that can be sprayed on grasses.

In Wilmington, they first tried large model screech owls, having been told no seagull will linger near one.

The fake owls came down a few days later, covered in droppings.

Desperate, they began investigating more exotic measures: a trained peregrine falcon or two, a model airplane, recordings of a severely distressed seagull (“I think it was being killed on the tape,” Widell said).

But there’s an hourly charge for trained falcons and falconers, and model airplanes can’t be flown in the rain. The recording was rejected as laughable. Then Widell remembered a story he’d read about border collies being trained to chase geese away from golf courses and public parks.

“I thought, why not seagulls?” he said.

A breeder and trainer of working collies was found in Toronto. In March, Cooper and his trainer arrived. He immediately went to work, a barking blur of brown and white.

“He just started running like the devil,” Widell said. In two days, the thousands of seagulls decided the composting facility wasn’t such a great roost after all and the invasion was over.

The company spent about \$7,500 purchasing and importing the dog, building him an indoor-outdoor living area, and installing an underground electrical fence. One of the company’s vice presidents keeps track of the canine’s veterinary schedule, and Cooper has all the kibble he can eat.

“All in all, it’s the best money we’ve spent,” Widell said. “The birds are gone, and there’s all sorts of other benefits.”

Cooper is lovable and loving, and workers have signed up on a waiting list to take him home for the weekends. He supervises employees when they're checking oxygen levels in the plant's composting windrows and chases the water truck as it cleans the facility several times a day.

"He's become a great mascot," said Widell.

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