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Bird Lady, Scarecrow 5 and Merlin do their part in keeping passengers safe at RIX

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Eye in the sky: Keeping feathered creatures away from airplanes in flight is a constant job for Dzintra Gulane.

RIGA - I begin my journey like so many others do – on bus #22 from central Riga. I'm RIX-bound. Once aboard, I sms "on the way," and though I know I'll be on time, the PR person receiving the text message does not.

Once there I disembark and head to one of the non-descript administrative buildings that serve as part of the 1,000-person force that makes up the administrative structure known officially as SJSC Riga International Airport. But in reality, some 5,000 people work in various aspects of the corporate structure of RIX under contract. All the way from grass cutters and ground crew specialist to air traffic controllers – the high pressure job of any airport.

I am met by a smiling press representative, who I am sure has been told to find out, "what's this guy up to?" Answer, at this point: I don't know, thus neither does he. That's why I am here, to find out "how it

works," something specific.

My quest began a week before, when I decided to seek out, and find, 'the Bird person.' I ask nicely in an email for permission to "come out," and learn a little more – first-hand, some aspect of the airport operations – in particular, bird management control. Granted. I'm a lucky guy.

Since ancient times man has dreamed of taking to the skies like a bird. When this dream came true – i.e. Charles Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic in 1927 – it was nature's feathered fellow flyers which man agreed to share the skies with. Back then, all was in harmony.

Today, the idea of birds and planes is not the same. According to the International Civil Aviation Organization Bird Strike Information System, around 40,000 bird strikes are registered in civil aviation all over the world, each year.

I want to meet RIX's bird person

RIX alone has over 5,500 plane arrivals and departures per month, according to airport representatives. Not something the general public thinks about, but reality. Each departure and landing entails the precision of pilot coordination and air traffic controller guiding these man-made birds in and out. Other professionals play a role as well – all in the name of airport safety.

With my press contact person, I'm checked into the internal RIX security office. I present my passport and am handed a lime-colored reflective jacket along with my visitor's badge. I am now approved to be on the tarmac. I am officially 'somebody,' I think to myself. I proudly don my reflective jacket.

After that, I am introduced to one jovial and smiling Dzintra Gulane, Bird and Wildlife Controller – Airfield Management Officer. Bird Lady!

If first impressions count, something tells me that Dzintra loves her job.

According to RIX, over 5,000,000 passengers were in the skies of Latvia in 2011. All landed and departed

safely thanks in part to airport management control – the Bird Lady and her team of dedicated professionals in the airfield control department.

Niceties out of the way, I am escorted by the Bird Lady to her waiting vehicle, a colorful checkered yellow and black ‘aerodrome’ tarmac-only car. This specially out-fitted vehicle is pack full of the latest high tech computer systems, flashing lights, mounted loudspeakers, with direct radio communication to the control tower, certainly something you won’t see on the streets of Riga.

With Bird Lady in the driver’s seat, I say goodbye to my press contact; “see ya later” I say. Bird Lady’s mode of territorial travel is known as Scarecrow 5. This motorized tool to bird and animal control is pointed in the direction of the airport runway access security checkpoint. This final stop, however, is met before we reach the airport tarmac.

I get out of the car, into the security hut, and a walk through a metal detector, just like passengers experience in the main terminal near the departure gate. I successfully pass RIX airport security. All employees pass through as well. No one is exempt.

Scarecrow 5 is also searched by a security officer – including the opening of the trunk lid. From there we drive onto the tarmac and stop next to an airBaltic aircraft being serviced. The runway stretches in front of me left to right.

I look to the sky for planes. Bird Lady looks at the sky for birds.

Bird Lady & Scarecrow 5

The responsibility for wildlife and aerodrome management control extends beyond the confined area of RIX and its 570 hectares. The tree-line surrounding the airport extends some 300 meters out, and patrols of the outside surrounding area can go as far as 13 kilometers. The airport authorities communicate with residents and farmers outside the airport to see what they are doing, activities that may have some impact on animal control. An attempt is made to make sure everyone works in unison for the safety of the airport. Constant communication with RIX neighbors is high on the list of management’s responsibility.

Years before, nesting locations of migratory birds were identified and discretely dealt with. No disrespect for nature; passenger and aircraft safety is paramount in all decisions dealing with wildlife management.

This responsibility goes beyond the common belief of bird control in the air of the airport, but extends to the length of the grass in the open lands on the aerodrome. Specified fencing requirements of the airport authority exists, and hence fencing is set some 50 cm into the ground to prevent foxes and hares from tunneling under. Barbed wire tops the fence, to keep birds from parching. The grid of the fence is tight enough to keep most small unwanted four-legged locals out. Pond and water topography management exists within the aerodrome to assure no pooling takes place, and water runoff is free to keep feathered fellows away from a quick afternoon drink.

Says Bird Lady, aka Gulane “I love my job.” She is a professional, with a Master of Micro Zoology and doctoral studies in pedagogy.

Gulane began her Bird Lady career in June 2009, and has put her heart and soul into this important responsibility ever since. “My job is to assist in the protection of passengers and birds – to keep each away from each other,” she says.

Bird Lady is not alone in her stewardship. Some nine additional staff members assist in their 24-hour responsibility of bird and wildlife control. Daily reports are produced, along with the voice recorder record of the control tower and the landing and departing pilot statements, plus information from Scarecrow 5, which all becomes a record in the management of Riga International Airport.

Runway Bound!

With Bird Lady in the driver’s seat and I her lone passenger, we take a drive internally around the perimeter of the airport. Bird Lady points out interesting facts on our tour. Eventually we scoot up on a part of the runway which accesses the main runway, as I watch a Lufthansa afternoon flight receive “permission to go” from the tower. Lufthansa 14:15 flight is soon airborne. Bird Lady radios the tower to “request permission to access the runway.” A few seconds later, “permission granted Scarecrow 5” says the tower. Onto the runway we go.

We head down the runway just like a ...well, departing plane – yellow lights a-flashing. Bird Lady sees something. I naturally miss it – I'm too busy looking skywards for a possible landing plane!

All of the sudden, BIRDS – yaks! A flock of feathered protagonists is spotted on the grassy area between the main runway and the service runway, checking out Bird Lady and me. Immediately, Bird Lady engages one of the 14 bird distress calls mounted on Scarecrow 5, and the birds take off. But it doesn't end there. Bird Lady asks the control tower, "permission to engage flare gun."

"Permission granted Scarecrow 5," the response comes back in a somber voice. With ear protection in place, out of the car she goes, arm extended high towards the sky, firing off a single shot pistol as permitted – BOOM-BANG – sending some 250 sparrows at a very slow Mach 1 – maximum speed for these intruders. No smile is shown by Bird Lady's face as she returns to Scarecrow 5. This is serious business. With the birds gone, I ask, "how long can we stay out here?" as I again look skyward – thinking again about man-made birds. As if they heard me, the tower calls back, "you have one minute to leave the runway Scarecrow 5." I agree with the air traffic controller.

This is but one bird encounter out of many to be recorded by the bird and wildlife airfield department. Every encounter is reported to the department's reporting systems. This one is no exception. Those birds were not put out there just for this reporter to see.

According to European Aviation Safety Agency, 96 percent of bird strikes occur during takeoff, climb approach and landing within the European Union.

At RIX, thousands of landings and takeoffs accrue on a monthly basis. Bird Lady and her team, with the help of Scarecrow 5, "dispersed with some 23,198 in 2011," according to their Bird and Animal Control Report. Altogether, the staff carried out a total of "48,728 bird dispersal measures in 2011," states the RIX report. Unbelievable, this one-time viewer of a dispersed bird flock thinks.

Bird management officials have recorded some "22 confirmed bird strikes" for the year 2011 at RIX. Against over 5,500 arrivals and departures per month, Bird Lady and her 'A Team' are doing a commendable job. An acceptable level of tolerance is "one per 1,000" accordingly to ICAO.

Bird Lady's responsibility extends beyond simple bird watching to include being the eyes and ears of senior management on the ground for day-to-day monitoring in real time of constantly changing ground conditions. But luckily they are not alone in their constant quest to keep birds, hares and four legged creatures off runways and free of restricted areas. Beavers and foxes have been known to attempt to visit RIX as well, unwelcome – unlike me this day.

MERLIN the American helper in Riga

Bird Lady and her team cannot be everywhere at once. But MERLIN can.

In January 2011 Riga International Airport contracted the services of U.S. firm DeTect, which installed the MERLIN Aircraft Birdstrike Avoidance Radar systems that monitors for bird strikes. This state-of-the-art real-time system tracks bird movements based on a graft/grid-designed system in place over RIX. In essence, a modern-day bird watch tracking system.

Strategically placed on the grassy area west of the runway, this eye-in-the-sky is connected by DeTect systems to Scarecrow 5, the control tower, and a workstation in the middle of the airfield. DeTect is certified by the U.S. government for use by NASA and the U.S. Air Force and is currently the "only one in Europe serving a civil aerodrome," according to Janis Maslovskis, Aerodrome Technical Manager, Airfield Management Department, RIX.

The advantage of this technology is precise, tactical and automated bird-aircraft strike risk alerts to controllers and pilots that detects birds from ground level to above aircraft altitudes. Providing both vertical and horizontal scanning radar configurations, this year-round system works in fog, rain and snow, according to the DeTech Web site, and is a supplement to the eyes and ears of the Bird Lady and her team roaming the airfield. MERLIN never sleeps. Time for me to leave.

Shortly thereafter, I return to the security checkpoint, Scarecrow 5 is again inspected. I bid goodbye to Bird Lady and wish her well with her personally rewarding job. A smile comes across Bird Lady's face. My vest and badge are turned in at the office. Once again, I am nobody.

Following a short meeting with security and safety management about statistically boring stuff, I return to Riga on bus #22, along with newly arrived passengers to RIX. I'm already missing Birsd Lady. We're headed back to Riga.

However, I leave the airport knowing safety is the major priority by all involved in the chain of command. My short time on the tarmac only highlights the importance of the entire team, and the dedicated work put in 24/7 at Riga International Airport by all.

My highest respect for Gulane and the unmet others performing the never-ending job of bird and wildlife control airfield management at RIX.