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G A L V E S T O N  C O U N T Y

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Galveston gathering ideas to protect birds

By **JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON**

The Daily News

Bruce LePard was among the first people to arrive at the American National tower in downtown Galveston on the morning of May 4. He and some of the company's maintenance staff were among the first to see the

carnage that had happened the night before.

A spring storm had forced a flock of birds down from their normal migrating altitude. Either because of whipping winds or a deceiving lights, about 400 birds had slammed into the side of the building.

They fell dead into the plaza

below.

They were found the next morning, and the story quickly spread beyond Galveston. Photos taken by Galveston Animal Control officers appeared in The Washington Post and other major news outlets. American National Insurance Co., normally a quiet presence on the island,

found itself in the center of attention, said LePard, a senior vice president at the company.

"We started receiving calls from all around the world," he said. People wanted American National to do something in response to the incident, the first of its kind at the 45-year-old building, as far as anyone could

remember.

The company wanted to help, he said.

"Birds have always been in our history," LePard said. The company's logo is an eagle, he pointed out.

The May incident has left local

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groups seeking to define what exactly, if anything, Galveston can do to ensure similar incidents don't happen in the future. American National and Houston Audubon on Friday convened a workshop with local birders, city officials and business representatives to discuss the issue.

Richard Gibbons, the conservation director for Houston Audubon, lauded the way American National responded to incident. The

company shut off the lights surrounding the tower, marking the first time that had happened since Hurricane Ike in 2008 knocked out power.

But Gibbons said the issue of bird strikes on buildings wouldn't be stopped by just one skyscraper going dark. It's a communitywide problem.

"This started to be a problem when there was just a lighthouse," he said. "Now the problem is a millionfold."

The Texas coast is, generally, a stopover for birds traveling to and from the northern United State and

South America. Galveston is hardly alone as a well-lit place along the route that millions of birds travel.

While turning lights off is one of the most visible protective gestures, it may not be the most effective one, said Daniel Klem, an ornithologist from Pennsylvania's Muhlenberg College, who has spent his career studying bird strikes on buildings.

Bird deaths, which could total a billion a year, can be attributed more to reflective surfaces than attractive lighting, Klem said

Bird deaths aren't lim-

ited to tall buildings with large glass windows either, Klem said. More deaths might come, as a whole, from the times when single birds hit living room windows or ground-story storefronts.

"Wherever birds and windows coexist you have potential disaster," Klem said. The only way to prevent such strikes totally would be to remove windows altogether. That, he admitted, was unfeasible.

"You're dealing with a product that is unbelievably useful to people," he said.

There are ways to dis-

courage these types of deaths from happening, such as putting reflection-breaking patterns on windows — lines or diamonds, for instance — that signal the existence of a pane of glass to birds.

While an online petition after the mass killing called for the city to enact a "lights out" ordinance to protect birds during migration season, that idea has not been taken up by the Galveston City Council.

A city planning department employee who attended Friday's workshop said the city is considering providing information

about bird-safe construction to developers who come into city hall, and floated the idea of creating incentives for developers that use such methods.

That's an idea that the Audubon Society supports, Gibbons said.

"We're probably at the point where the carrot is a lot more useful than a stick," he said. "We have a big job as far as raising awareness goes."

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