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Moscow Authorities 'Discover' Flocks of Birds Near Plane Crash-Landing Site

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Moscow authorities said they have "discovered" gulls flocking around one of two garbage sites near the airport where a Russian passenger plane made a "miraculous" emergency landing on Thursday.

All 234 people on board the Ural Airlines Airbus A321 survived when it landed in a cornfield southeast of Moscow after both of its engines struck a flock of gulls. Moscow region officials initially rejected claims that the gulls may have come from a nearby landfill, saying the closest garbage dump to Zhukovsky International Airport was 14 kilometers away.

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Russia's Federal Inspection Service for Natural Resources Use confirmed on Thursday that a waste sorting station and an "illegal" landfill are located less than 2 kilometers from Zhukovsky's runway.

A flock of birds was “discovered after all” near the waste sorting station, the Moscow region’s top environmental official told Interfax on Friday. No birds were found at the illegal landfill nor at the facility 14 kilometers away from Zhukovsky airport, the official, Dmitry Kurakin, said.

The Federal Inspection Service and Moscow region-based authorities plan to inspect the landfills near the airport on Friday, Interfax reported.

The illegal landfill’s operator has previously been fined for violating environmental standards, then fined for failing to comply with orders to close it.

Authorities had inspected complaints of landfills attracting birds to areas near the airport a month before the crash-landing, Yevgeny Solodin, a senior executive with the airport’s operating company, told the state-run Rossia 24 television channel.

Bird strikes occur 10 times more often in Russia than in Europe, the head of Russia’s fifth-largest airline Utair told the Vedomosti business daily in the wake of the incident. Federal Air Transportation Agency data shows that Russia had twice as many bird strikes as the U.S. in 2017.

On Friday, a Utair flight from Moscow to Ufa was grounded after the plane collided with a flock of birds during takeoff. The plane landed safely with no injuries, Utair's press service told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

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