

State Investigating Dead Birds Found Near National Arts Club

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Dept. of Environmental Conservation is investigating Gramercy Park's dead birds as is the ASPCA.



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By Amy Zimmer

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GRAMERCY PARK — New York State environmental officials launched an investigation Tuesday into the dead zebra finches that were found on the streets and sidewalks of this elite enclave over the weekend.

The Department of Environmental Conservation probe is in addition to an animal cruelty investigation already underway by the ASPCA, which dispatched two agents to search the park on Tuesday.

"We are looking into it," said DEC spokeswoman Lori Severino, explaining that the release of these birds was in violation of Environmental Conservation Law 11-0507, aka "the nuisance wildlife control license," which requires permission to release wildlife.

Both agencies said they had received complaints from locals concerned about the mysterious bird sightings.

Many locals believe the birds came from the National Arts Club, the venerable institution facing the south side of the park whose president, O. Aldon James, is an avid bird lover known to keep them in the club's historic building. James admitted to the *Daily News on Monday* that he purchased four dozen zebra finches like the ones found dead in the park in the days before the incident, but he denied that he released them.

How the birds got outside was "an Agatha Christie mystery," James said.

But witnesses told DNAinfo they heard the loud singing of an unusually large number of birds coming from a second floor office inside the club on Saturday, a day before residents spotted dead birds scattered around the neighborhood.

"The only thing missing from that room [was] Tippi Hedren," said a recent visitor to the Arts Club, alluding to Alfred Hitchcock's famous movie, "The Birds." This visitor saw what seemed like a private aviary with big and small birds, large and small beaked, including one cage with at least 50 tiny birds.

Bird breeder Pierre Brooks, who told the *News* he sold the birds to James, and who club veterans say has sold James many birds in the past, is not licensed with the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, which is responsible for overseeing New York bird breeders.

A spokeswoman for the agency said New York's breeders do not need a license in order to sell "properly banded 'caged' birds" and added that the zebra finch is on the state's list of birds that can be sold without any restriction.

ASPCA agents have received at least two dead birds with numbered leg bands from the park area — one turned over by DNAinfo at the request of a witness who found it near the park, and the other from *New Yorker* staff writer, Janet Malcolm, who had kept one of the dead birds after finding it outside the fence of Gramercy Park.

But experts told DNAinfo it will be almost impossible to track the source of the birds through the numbered leg bands, which can be purchased from multiple sources around the country and do not have any centralized oversight requirements.

Bob Peers, spokesman for the National Finch and Soft Bill Society, said his organization is one of the places that sell numbered bird bands. But he explained that while his organization sells bands with information indicating his organization's name, the year it was sold, and the size of the bird, other clubs may not follow the same procedure. And even if they do, there's no assurance what happens to the band when it's sold, he said.

"Once they're in the hands of the individual they can do whatever they want with them," Peers said.