

Full moon and empty beaches: horseshoe crabs a no-show

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MIDDLE TOWNSHIP - The full-moon tide Monday night flooded the Delaware bayshore, heralding an annual natural phenomenon - the spawning of horseshoe crabs.

But as the tide receded Tuesday on the rainy, windswept Reeds Beach, not one of the prehistoric-looking crabs could be found.

The spawning typically coincides with the full moon and new moon tides. It is a marvel of the animal kingdom as thousands of the dinnerplate-sized crabs carpet the beaches along the Delaware Bay.

This natural spectacle draws people from across the mid-Atlantic. But visitors were disappointed Tuesday.

"I was bewildered. I went out last night to Norbury's Landing to look for them. I was surprised not to see any crabs come in," said Mark Garland, a naturalist with the Cape May Bird Observatory.

He led about 50 people on a birding tour of the Delaware Bay. Garland speculated that the water was too cold and the seas too rough for the crabs.

Nature lovers are not the only ones awaiting the crabs' return.

Red knots, ruddy turnstones, dunlin and other shorebirds scoured the sand in search of crab eggs. The birds had slim pickings, at least on Reeds Beach.

The birds, particularly red knots, rely on horseshoe-crab eggs to fatten up after their epic migration from the southern tip of South America. The birds rest along the Delaware Bay for a few weeks before continuing their trek north to their arctic breeding grounds.

The crabs spend their lives in the ocean but come on land to lay their eggs, which resemble olive couscous. The crabs inadvertently dig up each others' nests, opening a smorgasbord for shorebirds.

A busload of birders stood expectantly on a viewing platform, peering over the dunes.

Martha Sullivan of Ringoes planned her visit to Cape May County to coincide with the arrival of both crab and shorebird.

"We timed it around the migration, to correspond with the red knots' arrival," she said.

They saw a couple of birds but nothing like the flocks they were hoping for.

The shorebirds have brought birders from across the Mid-Atlantic to Middle Township's beaches. Mayor

Nathan Doughty surveyed the bayshore at Reeds Beach on Tuesday. He said he has seen license plates from as far away as Massachusetts.

"There's been a lot of out-of-town traffic. I think it's good for the economy," he said.

Not everyone agrees.

Middle Township resident Fred Layton pulled up in his pickup truck. Normally, he would be out on the bay collecting the bigger female crabs to sell as bait for conch and eel pots.

But in a controversial move, the state this year banned the harvest to boost crab numbers and provide more eggs for the declining red knots.

Instead of making a living on crabs, Layton fumed in his truck, shooting dark looks at the birders who walked by toting spotting scopes and binoculars.

"I'm losing a few dollars," he said.

He urged the mayor to put a stop to the nearby cannon-netting of red knots by scientists who are studying the birds. The researchers catch the birds to see how much weight they gain during their brief stopover.

Layton said the crabs are spawning, just not along the storm-carved beaches. He blames beach erosion for the crabs' absence.

"They should be up in there thick as pitches," he said.

The Ecological Research and Development Group, a Delaware nonprofit that studies horseshoe crabs, said the crabs have already spawned in parts of the Delaware Bay. The group counts crabs along the East Coast.

"It took place, just not everywhere," group President Glenn Gauvry said.

The May 12 northeaster brought in colder ocean water that kept the crabs off some beaches, he said.

"The peak has probably been delayed a bit because of the storm. I'd imagine we'll see it in the next couple weeks," he said. "They had tons of crabs on one of the beaches on the Delaware side."

Gauvry said the birds have a one-sided relationship with the crabs.

"The media tend to play up the synchronicity of the relationship. But the horseshoe crabs do not have a clue they're supposed to be setting the table for the shorebirds," he said.

The crabs evolved 400 million years ago, long before the first bird took wing. At the time, the Earth's oceans - full of hungry predators - were less hospitable to tasty crab eggs than land, so the helmet-shaped crabs evolved instead to spawn on sandy shores.

"It's quite a remarkable event. They were here 100 million years before birds existed, before dinosaurs, before the Appalachian Mountains were formed," he said.

Diana McFadden, of Bloomsburg, Pa., watched three black skimmers glide over the water. She has been coming to the Delaware Bay since 1968.

"There were so many birds and so many crabs. It was almost savage," she said. "They're the oldest living fossil. I find it sad to think this creature has been around for millions of years and in our lifetime we may lose them."

Gauvry said the crabs are doing well. This year's numbers are encouraging, he said. But the longer the crabs wait to spawn, the harder it will be on the shorebirds.

"My concern is for the shorebirds because the crabs are not out yet," he said.

Tour leader Garland said the empty beaches worry him a little, too.

"I was bewildered. The whole phenomenon depends on the beaches being full of crabs. We need beaches full of crabs to dig up old nests," he said. "Maybe tonight. We'll see."

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