

Bird patterns change

Red knots split feeding grounds, raising questions on future

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MIDDLE TOWNSHIP — About one out of every four red knot shorebirds decided Stone Harbor and its blue mussels buffet was the place to be this spring.

The splitting of migratory red knots into two feeding areas — one on the Atlantic coast, and their usual foraging grounds a few miles westward on Delaware Bay — may signal the birds are adapting to other food sources as they find fewer horseshoe crab eggs on the bay's beaches, scientists and fishermen say.

Beyond that, shorebird advocates and watermen can't agree on much else. With Delaware Bay red knot counts back to levels seen in 2004, shorebird researchers on Friday said the robin-sized red knots are simply doing the best they can to find food.

Both sides are gathering information to bolster their legal and political positions. New Jersey officials this spring declared a two-year moratorium on taking crabs for fishing bait. But New Jersey Audubon and allied environmental groups saw their bid for a broader regional moratorium rejected last month.

"Because of the unpredictable availability of (horseshoe crab) eggs, the birds are creating new patterns," said Larry Niles, chief of the division's Endangered and Non-Game Species Program.

A massive winter growth of mussels on the Atlantic coast mudflats and bars between Stone Harbor and North Wildwood attracted around 4,000 red knots, leaving another group estimated at up to 13,000 birds feeding on horseshoe crabs along nearby Delaware Bay beaches, Niles said.

"There are thousands in places all over," said Mike Litchko, a fisherman who sets crab and conch traps around the birds' Stone Harbor shellfish bonanza.

"The birds are spread out. They're so diversified, it's almost impossible to assess a total population."

Niles and other scientists with the Delaware Bay Shorebird Project think the birds' choice of tiny blue mussels may kill many in the long run. Adult red knots that fly from South America and stop here to feed before continuing on to Arctic nesting grounds seem to be dying at twice the usual rate, they say.

"Adult survival varies from year to year," said Humphrey Sitters, an ecologist with the International Wader Study Group who has analyzed the relative nutritional value to birds of mussels and crab eggs.

The big problem is survival has dropped from 70 or 80 percent down to between 55 and 60 percent, Sitters said. That's been the basis of a 2004 prognosis that the western Atlantic subspecies of red knot could be in danger of extinction by 2010.

Moreover, the entire assemblage of Delaware Bay shorebirds — including five other species besides the red knot — has plummeted from an estimated 1.5 million birds in the 1980s to around 200,000 during the peak count last month, said Amanda Dey, a biologist with the Division of Fish and Wildlife and co-director of the shorebird project.

This spring, state officials closed 15 beaches to public access, including two areas on the Atlantic coast.

"The beaches we're closing tend to be the most important foraging areas," Dey said.

Two environmental groups — New Jersey Audubon and Defenders of Wildlife — are helping to support the beach monitoring, Dey said. Much of it is done by volunteers who stay at the beaches to explain the reasons for the closings to visitors, she said.

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