

FINAL DECLINE "BY 2010'

Feds deny request on red knot; group says bird faces extinction

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Federal officials denied an emergency request by conservation groups to have the western Atlantic subspecies of red knot shorebirds declared an endangered species, according to shorebird advocates who contend the robin-sized birds could enter their final decline by 2010.

"If the bird is not awarded protection under the Endangered Species Act, it will likely disappear from New Jersey's shores in a matter of years," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, executive vice president of Defenders of Wildlife, in a prepared statement protesting the decision. The Washington D.C.-based group took the lead in presenting a petition last June to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But in its letter to petitioners, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made clear it's continuing a review of the red knot's status, said Tim Dillingham of the American Littoral Society.

"They recognize the bird is in deep trouble, but they deferred to the ongoing efforts" by state governments to protect the birds and their Delaware Bay feeding grounds, Dillingham said.

Red knots are among a number of shorebird species that arrive by the thousands every spring to Delaware Bay in a mass migration that coincides with the spring breeding season of horseshoe crabs. The birds feed heavily on horseshoe crab eggs, and shorebird scientists have linked a sharp decline in red knot numbers to heavy fishing of horseshoe crabs for fishing bait during the 1990s.

State and federal fisheries regulators sharply reduced the crab harvest in recent years, but scientists working with the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife report continuing declines on the red knots' largest known wintering grounds at Tierra Del Fuego on the southern tip of South America.

Clark said red knot counts have consistently declined for seven years and remain at their lowest point since the 1980s. The South American winter count plunged from 31,000 to 17,000 birds between 2004 and 2005, and the birds could fall into the extinction stage by 2010 if the trend continues, shorebird scientist Allan J. Baker of the Center for Biodiversity and Conservation Biology at the Royal Ontario Museum warned two years ago.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials cited ongoing efforts to protect the birds' food supply and habitat. New Jersey and Delaware may impose a total two-year moratorium on all horseshoe crab harvesting this spring.

A federal endangered species listing for the red knot could bring more sweeping measures into play, such as federal enforcement of beach closings when the birds are feeding in spring. New Jersey wildlife officials have cited the potential complications of a federal listing to justify their own efforts to limit bird disturbance and reduce the crab harvest.

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