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U.S. agency draws fire for red knot decision

The wildlife service denied an emergency request to list the birds as endangered, saying such actions are rare.

By Sandy Bauers
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Even as a diminished population of red knots winters in southern Chile, fattening up for the long migration north through the Delaware Bay, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has denied an emergency request by conservation activists to list the bird as endangered.

The agency contended no emergency existed but is considering proposals to list the red knot on a nonemergency basis.

Jamie Rappaport Clark, executive vice president of Defenders of Wildlife, one of the groups that sought the emergency listing, criticized the denial as a political decision, "pure and simple... . The Bush administration's action makes one wonder just how close to extinction an animal must be before it will act."

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's John Watson, assistant commissioner for natural and historic resources, said he, too, was "disappointed... . We think this population is at a critical point."

In the last decade, the red knot population has dropped from nearly 100,000 on the Delaware Bay, a migratory stopover, to fewer than 15,000. Computer models predict the bird could be extinct by 2010.

Spokeswoman Diana Weaver said the denial did not mean the Fish and Wildlife Service was not concerned about the species.

An emergency listing is "something we rarely do," she said. "It's to be used in a situation where the species is in imminent danger of becoming extinct if we don't take action immediately."

Technically, the service has 90 days after a petition is filed to decide whether to propose a listing. But it has been nearly six months since environmental groups, including the New Jersey Audubon, American Bird Conservancy, and Delaware Riverkeeper, filed petitions.

"We have so many issues and so few resources that it takes us longer," Weaver said.

Fish and Wildlife's regional office has nearly completed its recommendation. If officials in Washington propose the species for listing, public hearings will be held before a final determination.

Caroline Kennedy, director of field conservation programs for Defenders, said an emergency listing would have put pressure on the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which regulates the crab harvest.

The eggs of the bay's horseshoe crabs are considered the one food rich enough to restore the red knots, emaciated after a four-day flight from South America, but the numbers of eggs have declined.

Last spring, New Jersey temporarily halted crabbing during the red knot migration. In November, the Atlantic States Fisheries Commission proposed a two-year moratorium on a broader swath of coastline to protect the birds' food supply.

On Jan. 6, at a fisheries commission meeting in Philadelphia to review the moratorium, a seafood company executive proposed allowing the harvest of male crabs. Bird conservationists there complained that they did not get a chance to submit their own proposals.

New Jersey is contemplating a two-year moratorium, in case the Atlantic States proposal fails.

The red knot population, said Watson of New Jersey's DEP, is "at such a critical point, we have to err on the side of caution and do everything we can that's within our authority."

Watson said he expected New Jersey's moratorium to be formally proposed Feb. 6, with public hearings to follow. He said state officials were "very interested" in finding a way to offset financial problems that crabbers might face.

Recently, New Jersey DEP biologist Larry Niles returned from studying an isolated population of red knots that winter along Florida's Gulf Coast.

He had expected to find 6,000 birds. He found 2,000.

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