

September 4, 2008

He speaks for the horseshoe crab

By CAROL CHILD

Special to The News Journal

SMYRNA -- Glenn Gauvry can give new meaning to your next walk along a Delaware beach. For more than a decade, he has been educating Delawareans and others about the plight of a familiar face on Delaware beaches: The horseshoe crab. The prehistoric looking creature is considered an important part of the ecosystem and crucial to the survival of dwindling populations of shorebirds, including the endangered red knot. The birds feed on horseshoe crab eggs in Delaware en route to northern breeding grounds.

To educate a larger audience, Gauvry founded the Ecological Research & Development Group in 1995 and operates a Web site (www.horseshoecrab.org) about the creature. He recently spoke to a group in Smyrna about its significance to the ecosystem.

Those who know Gauvry say the horseshoe crab couldn't have found a better advocate.

"I have seen him go door-to-door in several Delaware Bay beach communities to raise awareness of the need for horseshoe crab conservation, gently dispelling any misconceptions and negative attitudes along the way," said Gary Kreamer, of the Delaware Aquatic Resources Education Center in Smyrna.

The first task, Gauvry said, is protecting where horseshoe crabs live.

"My biggest concern is habitat, which falls predominately on or near people's backyards," said Gauvry, who lives in Lewes. "To date, six Delaware communities have signed on to the community-based horseshoe crab sanctuary program, protecting 14 miles of some of the most productive spawning beaches in the world. These bay shore communities are the ultimate stewards of the habitat the crabs and birds depend upon for survival."

A recent assessment found that efforts to rebuild the horseshoe crab population have worked, though it hasn't translated into increasing numbers of shorebirds. However, conservationists worry that if nothing is done, red knots will disappear by 2010.

"It is a miracle that the red knot continues to exist," said Dr. Carl N. Shuster Jr., who serves on the board of directors for Gauvry's group. Red knots, whose numbers are seen declining, gorge on horseshoe crab eggs along Delaware Bay shores refueling on their annual arduous flight from South America to the Arctic to breed. "The timing must be hit just right. Horseshoe crabs are generalists. Red knots are specialists. Species that go extinct are the specialists. Horseshoe crab eggs decreased markedly in 1992. By 2005 they were increasing."

Saving the creature is part of what drives advocates like Gauvry, who was once an air traffic controller, business owner and designer of custom furniture and other products. Gauvry volunteered for a year with Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research Inc., rising to senior technical coordinator on the oil spill response team in 1990.

The red knots' arrival here is "not synchronous but serendipitous," Gauvry said.

"If you measure the success of a species by how well it has learned to harmonize with the environment it depends upon for survival, then the horseshoe crab is a story. The jury is still out on us," he said. "It is important, as focus is placed on the science of this remarkable mariner, that we do not lose sight of our compassion for these living beings, for it is compassion that lies at the heart of conservation."
