

Crab poachers, beware!

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Federal officers are ramping up patrols in Jamaica Bay in search of one of the most obscure criminals on land or sea: horseshoe crab poachers. These shadowy seafaring scofflaws have been nabbed roaming shallow portions of the bay, using long boat hooks to pluck their prey from the sea bottom.



National Park Service biologist George Frame surveys horseshoe crabs by Jamaica Bay as feds set out to catch poachers on East Coast.

"We've also gotten reports where they come by van or truck and go down to one of the beaches and try to poach them that way," said U.S. Park Police Capt. John Lauro. This year, as horseshoe crabs come ashore to lay eggs in the coming weeks, the U.S. Park Police are increasing patrols at nesting hot spots to prevent poachers from contributing to a regional ecological problem.

The horseshoe crab, sometimes called a living fossil because it predates dinosaurs, is declining in numbers along the East Coast, largely because of heavy commercial harvests, scientists say. Horseshoe crabs are considered the perfect bait for catching squid and eels, and their blood is prized for medical research, said George Frame, a biologist with the National Park Service who is studying the horseshoe crab population in Jamaica Bay.

That heavy harvesting has also caused a ripple effect, taking a devastating toll on at least 11 species of migratory birds that rely on nutrient-rich horseshoe crab eggs for food, Frame said. One of those species, known as the red knot, could soon be added to the federal threatened species list.

In response to the disturbing trend, the National Park Service last year banned horseshoe crab harvesting throughout federally controlled Jamaica Bay, though the practice remains legal, with restrictions, in New York State waters. "All the concern we've had recently has just been to do everything we possibly can to at least maintain present numbers, or maybe increase numbers of horseshoe crabs, so the birds will have a better source of food," Frame said.

Toward that end, Lauro said, Park Police are concentrating boat and land patrols at key nesting sites throughout Jamaica Bay during high-tide periods when horseshoe crabs head for the shore. These spawning hot spots include the marshes along the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge and shoreline along the North Channel Bridge in Queens, and Plumb Beach and Dead Horse Bay, in Brooklyn.

A lack of historical data has hampered efforts to accurately gauge the severity of the horseshoe crab's decline, both regionally and in Jamaica Bay, Frame said. Though recent counts in Jamaica Bay have produced good numbers, early returns this year are foreboding. "We're still a little bit early in the nesting season, but we've been surprised by how few we are seeing," Frame said.

On May 16 of last year, during a new moon high tide, for example, 931 horseshoe crabs were counted along the newly reconstructed Elders East Marsh island in the northern portion of the bay. Last Monday, at a slightly different full moon high tide, only 229 horseshoe crabs were observed on the same island. "It was disappointing - and it's enough to make us wonder if there is a problem [in the bay]," Frame said.