

New nature center attracts a flock of bird-watchers

Mispillion Harbor site focuses on shorebirds and horseshoe crab eggs they feed on

By MOLLY MURRAY, The News Journal

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Robert Koch was a little surprised by the scene Wednesday at Mispillion Harbor.

The tents were up, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner was there, music played and people filed in for the dedication of the new DuPont Nature Center, designed to educate the public on shorebirds.

But what really got Koch was the actual birding -- hundreds of shorebirds all gathered and feeding on horseshoe crab eggs on a sandy spit just off the harbor.

"We don't normally see this," Koch said.

This week at Delaware Bay's Mispillion Harbor, shorebirds gather for the horseshoe crab. The crabs, which date back to the time before dinosaurs, are a critical link in the food chain. The shorebirds arrive as the crabs are spawning. The birds gorge on the eggs and often double their weight in about two weeks before flying off to Arctic breeding grounds.

State environmental officials recognize the value of the bird and crab spectacle and in 2005 purchased an old restaurant and marina that overlooks Mispillion Harbor. They used money from a wetland restoration fund to buy the property.

The plan was to turn the area into a shorebird viewing center.

But Roy Miller, state fisheries administrator, said state officials were limited in what they could do because of financial constraints.

Then, officials at DuPont Co. agreed to partner with the state to create a state-of-the-art bird viewing and environmental education center.

DuPont provided about \$550,000 to create educational exhibits and bring technology -- such as a big-screen television and remote camera that brings a real-time picture of the bird-feeding frenzy indoors.

The DuPont involvement in the project is part of the company's new Clear into the Future initiative.

The project focuses attention on the Delaware estuary from Trenton to Cape Henlopen.

Steven Threefoot, the project manager, said Clear into the Future focuses on the balance between environmental and the commercial aspects of the river.

"It's a working river," he said. "It's been a working river for 300 years."

That point was underscored Wednesday, when, amid the speeches and ribbon-cutting, hundreds of shorebirds fed on the horseshoe crab eggs on the sand flats in Mispillion Harbor. Just off shore, oil tankers stood by for the trip up river.

"It's amazing for bird-watchers who come here," Minner said. "It's a perfect place to view those shorebirds."

The center, she said, will also provide science-based education for schoolchildren who want to see Delaware Bay's global importance as a stopover for birds.

An estimated 30 species and up to 1 million birds pass through Delaware Bay during the spring migration.

In the center, educational displays explain where the birds come from and where they are headed. There is even a small aquarium with horseshoe crab eggs.

Dawn Webb, the center manager, said they are just waiting for those eggs to hatch.

The center is "designed to enable people to connect with nature and educate generations on the ecological significance of the region," she said.

"This is a world-class phenomenon," said Tony Picardi, a birder from Belle Haven, Va. "Areas like this are real gems to preserve."
