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Bird imperiled, feds rule

Agency designation moves red knot closer to endangered status

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Red knot shorebirds that stop in New Jersey on their spring migration are several steps closer to federal endangered species status, after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service revised its priority list and classed the birds as being in "imminent" peril.

"With the prediction that the red knot might go extinct by 2010, I don't think there are many other species that are just so close," said Maya K. van Rossum of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network. The higher priority listing will at least prod other states and federal agencies to do more for the birds, she said.

Shorebird experts have tied years of decline in red knot numbers to horseshoe crabs, which congregate on Delaware Bay beaches to lay eggs at the same time the birds arrive. Heavy harvesting of crabs for commercial fishing bait was restricted in the 1990s, but the birds have continued to decline, leading environmental groups to seek a coastwide ban on crab harvests.

The appointment of former New Jersey environmental commissioner Lisa P. Jackson to head the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency could help those advocates, van Rossum said. "Lisa Jackson has been very involved with this whole issue and getting New Jersey out in front on actions to protect the red knot. . . . She might really be able to nudge this along," she said.

New Jersey has been the only state with an outright ban on taking horseshoe crabs, while commercial fishermen point to surveys that show the Delaware Bay population is steady or increasing slightly. Delaware allows an annual harvest of 100,000 crabs, used to bait eel and whelk traps.

The Fish and Wildlife Service moved red knots to level 3 on its priority consideration list for protection under the Endangered Species Act; prior to this it had been at level 6 in the queue, said Caroline Kennedy of Defenders of Wildlife, one of several conservation groups that have been prodding the service for years to list the red knot as threatened or endangered.

The wildlife service ranks species in categories 1 through 12, based on the magnitude and immediacy of threats, with rankings 1 through 3 denoting immediate danger. Level 3 is as high as red knots will go in the ranking, because it is only the Western Atlantic "rosa" subspecies that is considered at risk, Kennedy said. It's one of six recognized red knot subspecies, three of them in North America.

"There's a backlog of funding for these species" that are at the top of the list for endangered-species protection, Kennedy said. Wildlife advocates have complained that under the Bush administration, the Department of Interior, the wildlife service's parent agency, has resisted new listings.

"Science has been sidelined for some time. We're hoping the Obama administration will follow the science better," Kennedy said.

On Monday, Interior Department inspector general Earl Devaney issued a report criticizing Julie MacDonald, a former deputy assistant secretary who oversaw the Fish and Wildlife Service, for interfering with the service's findings on endangered species issues. The Interior Department last year reversed seven rulings that denied endangered species increased protection, after an earlier investigation and report found that MacDonald had applied political pressure in those cases. The new report looked at nearly two dozen other endangered species decisions, mostly in the West and MacDonald's home state of California.
