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Horseshoe crabs grab the spotlight

Milton festival also celebrates shorebirds

By DAN SHORTRIDGE

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MILTON -- Horseshoe crabs don't usually bust out the bling.

But the normally bland-looking, brownish-shelled creatures were all a-sparkle in the spotlight Saturday, with shades of pinks and greens, blues and yellows, boasting pom-poms and googly eyes.

Childrens' hands-on horseshoe crab-centric artwork was just one of the activities on tap for families from around the region at Milton's annual festival celebrating horseshoe crabs and shorebirds, two inter-connected species that have brought international attention to Delaware's coastline.

Even the Irish Eyes pub got into the act, with shamrock-adorned molts in the window of the downtown establishment.

Linda McClintock and Betty Raymond of Rehoboth Beach brought along a passel of grandchildren, to support the community "and learn about science," said Raymond, a former science teacher herself.

They had just watched the youngsters spin around in circles, eyes tightly shut, and try to pin a telson on a horseshoe crab -- the equivalent of a tail on a donkey.

That event, a fundraiser for the festival, was run by honor society students at Milton Middle School to raise money for the Food Bank of Delaware.

"They get to vote on who they raise the money for," said honor society adviser Heather Kindl. "We're really proud of them."

A small train took kids on rides around the recently redone Milton Memorial Park -- featuring a playground with a nautical motif -- while adults strolled around perusing the wares of artisans and vendors, including fish-themed earrings and bird- and frog-styled stained glass works.

Some kids practiced casting for fish with rods and reels at a booth set up by the Lower Sussex Bassmasters, promoting their annual fishing tournament in the park on June 6.

Gabrielle and Adrian Wade of Millsboro brought their son, Parker, 4, for some holiday weekend fun, including a hay ride at Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge. Shuttles ran between the refuge and the main festival in downtown Milton all day.

"He was interested in horseshoe crabs," Gabrielle Wade said of her son. "He picks them up and carries them around."

The fun also came with a serious and educational side, as attendees crowded into a tent with information from environmental organizations and listened to speakers in the Milton Theatre.

This period between the end of May and the beginning of June is a peak time to spot horseshoe crabs spawning on the beaches, said expert Glenn Gauvry of the Ecological Research & Development Group.

At Pickering Beach, where he took a film crew from "Animal Planet" Friday night, they were spread across the shoreline at high tide, eight feet deep, as far as the eye could see.

"There were horseshoe crabs on top of horseshoe crabs," Gauvry said. "For the next couple of days, you're going to see quite a lot."

FYI

Some Horseshoe Crab and Shorebird Festival events will continue today in downtown Milton:

- Canoe, kayak or paddleboat rentals and guided tours on the Broadkill River, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
 - A free walking tour of historic Milton at 1 p.m., starting from the museum at 210 Union St.
 - An art show in Milton Family Chiropractic at 113 Union St., noon to 4 p.m.
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