

Running for a Cause

As she jogs the beach, Karen Allwood flips stranded crabs

BY MARY ANN BENYO

A silhouette appears against the early summer sunrise over the Delaware Bay. Jogging erratically, the figure weaves back and forth across the wide sandy beach, pausing for a few seconds, changing directions, running, pausing, running again. Clearly, this is no ordinary runner. This is Karen Allwood, known affectionately in her Prime Hook Beach community as the “crab flipper.”

During last year’s spawning season for the horseshoe crab, from mid-May through the end of July, Allwood righted 29,610 crabs that had the misfortune of getting stranded on the beach after mating.

Mature crabs, from the age of 12 to over 20, come ashore to lay and fertilize their eggs during the evening’s high tide, particularly around the full moon and new moon, then they return to the bay. When the surf is especially rough, they often get flipped upside down. Their long, pointy tails can sometimes help them right themselves if they catch a wave just right. But as the tide goes out, not to return for another 12 hours,

many of them are simply stuck, vulnerable to the heat of the rising sun and prey to the hungry gulls.

This simple act of flipping them right side up allows the vast majority of them to be able to make their way back to the safety of the water.

“They’re God’s creatures, living beings,” Allwood, an active member of the Eagle’s Nest Fellowship Church near Milton, says matter-of-factly. “If I don’t flip them today, tomorrow I’m going to have to look at them dead.” Starting some days as early as 5 a.m. when it’s light enough to see, she will cover as much ground as she can on her run between Prime Hook and Broadkill. By 7 or 8 a.m., she stops to get ready for work, teaching exercise programs in local senior centers and working part time for a home health-care agency.

After flipping all these crabs each morning, Allwood has perfected her technique. “I feel like a soccer player,” she says. “My main goal is to get them with one flip. It’s a challenge. They’re slippery, and sometimes they wiggle and fold their tails up, which makes it harder.” Using the



Karen Allwood turns a stranded horseshoe crab during an early morning run between Prime Hook Beach and Broadkill.

edge of her sneaker, she's learned to flip them uphill when the beach is on a significant slant rather than risk them rolling out of control downhill.

The reward? Turning around to run back across a clean beach, lined only with tracks of where the crabs had crawled as they made their way back to the water at low tide. Allwood notes that, like people, some of the crabs know exactly what they want and head straight for their goal of getting back to the bay after being flipped right side up. Others circle around several times, going back and forth, seemingly scattered and undecided before eventually arriving at the water.

"It's much tougher running at high tide," Allwood says. "You go down and flip them, then turn around and come back and flip the same ones. The waves are constantly tossing them and they have a hard time getting back in."

She carries a small knife with her to free the crabs who get fishing line tangled around their claws. "You never know who's going to have a problem," she says, but she can't solve all the problems she encounters. She describes finding a large fishing net that had ensnared numerous crabs. "There was no way I could ever get them all out."

It's especially hard after a storm, Allwood says. "They get stuck way up in the dunes, and you know they're not going to make it. You got to pick them all up — by the shell, never by the tail — and carry them down. Those are killer mornings."

But Allwood is clearly up to the task. When she's not out running, she is often seen biking, kayaking and sailing. Recently she helped trap a feral cat for neutering. "I like doing anything outdoors," she says cheerfully.

Although she has been flipping crabs for 10 or 11 years since she and her husband, Dave, moved to the beach, last year was the first summer she started counting them, pocketing a pebble for every 100 crabs. She writes down each day's tally on a scrap of paper, recording the weather and water conditions as well. The weekend of last Memorial Day was overwhelming, with a tally of 1,400 and the note "ran out of time, more to be flipped." The day before reads, "3,905 — went back out at 10:30."

The Importance of the Horseshoe Crab

The Ecological Research and Development Group placed an informational sign at Prime Hook Beach to teach visitors the importance of crabs and to encourage people to "Just Flip 'Em."

The crab's copper-based blood contains a clotting factor that detects disease-causing bacteria. A biomedical product made from their blood is used for screening all injectable medicines and devices implanted in the human body to assure that they are free of bacterial contamination. Scientists can remove up to 30 percent of a crab's blood without causing any harm.

As many as a million migratory shorebirds — at least 11 species — rely on horseshoe crab eggs to continue their journey. They eat the eggs that wash up at the edge of the surf, eggs that would otherwise dry up and not develop, so the birds have little effect on the crab population.

Beachgoers can help protect the horseshoe crab by following the advice: "Just Flip 'Em." ■

"If I could put up a red flag saying 'Come down! I need a hand!' it would help a lot," she says. "I know other people come out sometimes, but I wish I could alert the neighbors when it's really bad." Karen runs south, **trying to get** all the way to Broadkill before she runs out of time. Dave, when his knee is OK to run, takes a stretch part way to Broadkill as well. Neighbor Al Lynch often walks north to Fowler Beach, and chalked up an estimated 15,000 crabs last summer on his end.

Allwood's efforts, combined with the others who join in, are making a difference in the lives of thousands of crabs and the migrating birds that feed on their eggs, besides making a cleaner, nicer beach for the community. Allwood says simply, "I just want to run on the beach." ■

MARY ANN BENYO is a freelance writer from Prime Hook Beach.