

# No emergency listing for threatened red knot

Feds make shorebird a candidate for endangered status instead

By MOLLY MURRAY, The News Journal

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For nearly a decade, conservationists warned that dramatic measures were needed to halt a decline in population of shorebirds that feed on horseshoe crabs, like the robin-sized red knot.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service agreed that populations of the red knot have declined significantly. But the agency stopped short of taking emergency action to list the birds as an endangered species, which conservationists say indicates the bird could be extinct within years.

Instead, federal regulators designated the migratory birds -- which stop on the Delaware Bay shoreline in May and early June -- as a candidate for listing. The move is akin to placing the bird on a watch list.

More than 275 other species are already on the candidate list, which provides no special protection.

"A lot of other species are a higher priority," said Diana Weaver, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Regional office in Massachusetts.

Delaware and national conservation groups, which had petitioned for emergency listing, were disappointed with the decision.

"Unless listing happens soon, it will be too late ... to bring the species back," said Mike Pass, vice president of the American Bird Conservancy.

The Fish & Wildlife Service concluded that while the population had declined significantly, it did not warrant emergency listing because the threat to the bird is not imminent, said Marvin Moriarty, the Northeast regional director for the agency.

But conservationists argue that if nothing is done to protect the birds, they could be extinct by the end of the decade.

The red knot flies to Delaware Bay nonstop from its winter resting area at the tip of South America, and depends on an abundance of horseshoe crab eggs to fatten up. During the stop along the shores of Delaware Bay, the birds gorge for a week or two and then migrate to Arctic Canada, where they breed and raise their young.

Some scientists and conservationists believe overharvesting of horseshoe crabs has led to a decline in its population and in many species of crabs has led to a decline in its population and in many species of shorebirds. The red knots, however, appear to be the hardest hit by the decline.

In the winter of 2004, an estimated 30,000 red knots were counted in winter resting areas at Tierra del Fuego in South America. By 2005, the number dropped to 17,853 birds, said Annette Scherer with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. This year, researchers counted an estimated 17,211 red knots.

In counts along Delaware Bay, there have been similar signs of decline -- 13,445 birds during a peak count this year, down from 15,345 birds in 2005.

Meanwhile, state and federal regulators have cut harvests of horseshoe crabs. The animals, which predate dinosaurs, are used primarily as bait for conch and eel fisheries. But they are also important for biomedical research. Horseshoe crab blood coagulates at the slightest impurity and an extract from the blood is used to test the purity of most pharmaceuticals.

Nicholas DiPasquale, with the Delaware chapter of the Audubon Society, said the candidate status wouldn't likely have much impact on the effort to save the red knot. He said the federal agency is so busy and short-staffed that it could take years to do the research needed for listing.

"They'll just work on it as they have staff," he said. "We need to pull out all the stops."

John Hughes, secretary of the state Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, said he was encouraged by the decision. He has already started to meet with staff to see if additional steps are needed to protect horseshoe crabs and help that population rebound.

He said population estimates for horseshoe crabs appear to show the numbers are slowly increasing -- especially among young crabs that aren't of spawning age.

"Horseshoe crabs are beginning to show the process of recovery," he said. "There's increasing evidence the lower take has made a difference."

But Hughes said there is still cause for concern, especially with the red knots.

"With the population imperiled, you have to be very sure of your decisions."