

Delaware's horseshoe crabs, shorebirds celebrated

(Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

For those who want to know more about a pre-historic creature – and an ancient phenomenon that lures people from around the world to the shores of the Delaware Bay – head to Milton Friday and Saturday.

The Horseshoe Crab & Shorebird Festival, hosted by the Milton Chamber of Commerce, celebrates horseshoe crabs and migrating shorebirds, considered a natural wonder of the Delaware Bay. Every May and June, the crabs head to the shores by the thousands to spawn and lay eggs, attracting the curious, the naturalists and the shorebirds that feed off the eggs during their journey to the Arctic or to South America.



"The festival is timed to correspond with the arrival of horseshoe crabs and shorebirds to our area. We want to highlight them and educate people about what they do," said Lisa Sumstine, executive director of the Milton Chamber of Commerce.

Now in its 11th years, the festival is expected to draw 3,000 people for education and wildlife-dependent recreation at the Milton Municipal Park, the Broadkill River and the nearby Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge. Most activities will take place from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

Attractions in downtown Milton will include a tent with exhibits from environmental organizations, children's activities, the Horseshoe Crab Express train ride, scavenger hunts, art show, canoe and kayak rentals, boat rides, games and food. Prime Hook will offer opportunities for visitors to connect with nature such as a guided canoe trip, nature hikes, pond seining, videos, birding trips, building bluebird houses, archery family fun shoot, horseshoe crab touch tank and more.

A shuttle bus will travel between the town and Prime Hook all day.

Marie Mayor, co-chair of the event, said the activities aim to educate the public about the horseshoe crabs and shorebird, raise pride in the Delaware Bay habits and inspire individuals do what they can do take care of wildlife.

Horseshoe crabs are of ecological importance to the area and to other natural resources. Shorebirds such as red knots, ruddy turnstones, sanderlings and sandpipers feed off their eggs. Horseshoe crab fluids also are used in medicine to test the purity of vaccines and blood.

Mayor said the event also exemplifies cooperation.

"This is a terrific example of what a small town and a federal agency can do to work together and enhance each other's strengths," Mayor said.

Many nonprofits are also participating. New this year is a Friday-night event called Just Flip 'Em!, organized by the Ecological Research & Development Group, a wildlife conservation organization group based in Dover that focuses on horseshoe crab species.

The Just Flip 'Em! program addresses the high mortality among horseshoe crabs that occurs when they are stranded upside down during spawning, leaving them vulnerable to gulls pecking at them.

"We are going to walk around and flip over as many crabs as we can," Sumstine said.

Participants of the free event can gather at 8 p.m. at the Broadkill Beach in Milton. Another addition this year is the 7 p.m. Music at the Park concert featuring the group 33 1/3, which plays classic rock, blues and a little country.

To see the full schedule of events, go to horseshoecrabandshorebird.com.