

Celebrating horseshoe crabs

DOWNNE — Peter Delcollo, 6, of Cedarville lit up when he held one of the largest female crabs that was on the shore.

“I just like them,” he said. “They look really neat.”

Peter attended the 2014 Get Downe Horseshoe Crab Festival on Saturday along the Delaware Bay on Creek Lane and State Avenue in Fortescue. The all-day event celebrated the horseshoe crab and the fifth anniversary since the open public beaches in Fortescue were declared a Community Horseshoe Crab Sanctuary by the Township Committee. It's the only community-based horseshoe crab sanctuary in New Jersey.

The festival included beach walks, food vendors, local products and live entertainment. The goal was to deliver a simple message: Just flip 'em.

As horseshoe crabs emerge from the deep water to spawn on the beaches each spring, the surf flips many upside down. They get stranded on their backs when the tide goes out. Festival organizers encouraged visitors to help protect the species in a simple way: flip them back over, but not by the tail.

Simply grab the crab by its side and flip it. Don't worry about the pinchers. Horseshoe crabs can't clamp down on you like the familiar blue claw crab. It's common to reach for the tail; however, there is soft tissue at the base of the tail, and grabbing it can injure the crab, said Glenn Gauvry, president of the Ecological Research & Development Group, a nonprofit based in Dover, Delaware, that helped Downe Township develop the sanctuary.

“If you come to Fortescue a couple hours after high tide, you won't find any stranded upside down because the community has already taken care of it,” said Gauvry.

It's important to protect the species because horseshoe crab eggs provide an energy source for the 11 species of shorebirds that stop along the Delaware Bay during their northward migration, he added.

An educational beach walk was led by Michael Oates of Fortescue, who has documented horseshoe crabs along the Delaware Bay for more than 20 years. He explained their anatomy, their role in the ecosystem and how the public can ensure their existence.

Children scattered the shoreline after Oates gave them the green light to get hands-on with this ancient mariner, the Atlantic Horseshoe Crab. They searched for stranded crabs and inspected eggs that surfaced of the beach.

The success of the community sanctuary is dependent upon the next generation of stewards, said Downe Township Deputy Mayor Dennis Cook, and horseshoe crab education has become part of the curriculum at the Downe Township Elementary School.

Mayor Robert Campbell said the township committee hopes to create community sanctuaries on the beaches of Money Island and Gandy's Beach, two of the township's bayshore communities. A resolution will be introduced at the Township Committee meeting at 7 p.m. June 9 at the Downe Township Municipal Building, 288 Main St. in Newport.

A section of beach at the end of New Jersey Avenue is currently closed to public access to protect migrating shorebirds. This roped-off area is not part of Fortescue's Community Horseshoe Crab Sanctuary.