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Conservation Groups File Legal Action to Protect Red Knot Shorebird

American Bird Conservancy
American Littoral Society
Citizens Campaign for the Environment
Defenders of Wildlife
Delaware Audubon Society
Delaware Riverkeeper Network
National Audubon Society
New Jersey Audubon Society

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Washington, DC – A coalition of conservation groups today called on a federal court to hold the federal government accountable for failing to take critical steps needed to protect the Red Knot shorebird from extinction. The groups filed the lawsuit after two emergency petitions to list the Red Knot were denied by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It accuses the Service of denying the petitions based on speculative assessments about steps that will be taken to protect the Red Knot, many of which have not come to pass, and of improperly reviewing or ignoring key data about the Red Knots' decline.

“The failure to protect Red Knots is inexcusable,” said Caroline Kennedy, Director of Field Conservation for Defenders of Wildlife. “These birds are on the brink of extinction. Any delay in providing the critical protections these birds need just pushes them closer to the edge.”

Recent scientific data clearly illustrate the drastic decline of the Red Knot, including a recent study that warns that the Red Knot faces extinction as soon as 2010 if drastic steps are not taken to halt its decline. The Service itself also commissioned a draft status statement for the Red Knot that provided comprehensive data about the bird's decline.

In denying the listing petitions, the Service cited several factors related to its decision, including a proposal pending before the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to institute a two-year moratorium on the horseshoe crab take in Delaware Bay. The Service also noted that New Jersey and Delaware were independently considering instituting their own, statewide, two-year moratoriums on horseshoe crab take beginning in 2006. Of these proposals, only New Jersey instituted a full moratorium.

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The Service also noted in its denial of the petition that the birds stopping in Delaware Bay “seemed to have a relatively good year” since the number of birds observed in the Delaware Bay seem to have increased slightly from 2004 to 2005. This statement ignores abundant data that strongly suggests the Red Knot population is experiencing a long-term downward trend.

“Facing imminent extinction, the Red Knot should be the poster child for endangered species listing,” said Eric Stiles, Vice President for Conservation, New Jersey Audubon. “Global shorebird experts concur that the Red Knot is about to disappear and immediate protections are clearly warranted.”

The decline in the Red Knot population has been caused by overfishing of horseshoe crabs, whose eggs form the mainstay of the Red Knot’s diet during its migration through Delaware Bay. Prior to the dramatic increase in the take of horseshoe crabs in the 1990s, a plentiful supply of eggs allowed the Red Knots to feed briefly in the bay and gain the weight needed to successfully complete a nonstop flight to their Canadian arctic breeding grounds. “The federal government has demonstrated an unwillingness to do what is required to protect the birds, so now it’s up to the citizens and the region to do what is right and secure necessary protections,” said Maya van Rossum, Delaware Riverkeeper.