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Delaware Bay Bird Close to Extinction – Organizations Fighting for its Protection

American Littoral Society
Defenders of Wildlife
Delaware Audubon Society
Delaware Riverkeeper Network
New Jersey Audubon Society
Delmarva Ornithological Society
Delaware Sierra Club

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The American Littoral Society, Delaware Riverkeeper Network, Delmarva Ornithological Society, New Jersey Audubon Society and the Delaware Sierra Club have petitioned the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (the "Service") to list the Red Knot (*Caladris canutus rufa*) under the emergency listing provisions of the Endangered Species Act as an endangered species.

According to the organizations, the Red Knot are in severe decline and only emergency listing and application of the legal protections provided by the Endangered Species Act can save them.

Every spring migrating shorebirds, including the Red Knot, migrate up to 30,000 kilometers from wintering grounds in South America to breeding grounds in the Arctic. On this journey the birds will fly as far as 4000 miles nonstop. Their migration includes just a few critically timed and selected rest stops – the Delaware Bay is one of the most important. When the Red Knot *rufa* arrive at the Delaware Bay they are literally starving – they have used up their body fat, some of their lean body mass, and even their organs are shrunken in size. They come to

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the bayshore to rest and feast on horseshoe crab eggs, historically available in great abundance. They must eat enough eggs to double their body weight in a matter of about three weeks so they can successfully embark on the final nonstop leg of their journey.

Independent studies show that the number of Red Knot *rufa* observed in the Delaware Bay stopover has steadily declined from over 100,000 in the 1980s to 43,000 in 2000 to just 15,300 in the year 2005. Studies also have found that from the mid-1980s to 2005, the number of Red Knot *rufa* observed in their main wintering areas in South America decreased from over 51,255 in 2000 to 17,653 in 2005. Experts have predicted the Red Knot *rufa* will go extinct by the year 2010 under current conditions.

According to Tim Dillingham, Executive Director of the American Littoral Society, "These studies demonstrate conclusively that the Red Knot is on a path to certain extinction if substantial conservation measures are not taken immediately to halt and reverse the species' startling decline."

"The Red Knot are in decline because of the failure of legislators and regulators to take the action necessary to protect the birds' primary migratory food source, eggs from horseshoe crabs. The availability of horseshoe crab eggs are in decline, that is why the birds are in decline, everyone knows it and yet our public representatives and regulators are not doing what is needed to stop it" states Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper.

Delaware Bay is home to the largest population of horseshoe crabs in the world and historically has been able to provide the superabundance of eggs necessary to support and fuel the annual migration of shorebirds. But, according to the environmental organizations, "because of declines in the horseshoe crab population of Delaware Bay, we no longer have the superabundance of eggs needed by the birds. Research is showing that many Red Knot *rufa* are no longer able to consume enough horseshoe crab eggs during their Delaware Bay stopover. As a result, they will either be unable to survive the last leg of their migratory journey or they will lack sufficient nutritional stores needed to breed and reproduce" says Susan Kraham with NJ Audubon.

Horseshoe crabs are presently harvested and killed for use as bait for the conch and eel fishing industries.

Tim O'Connor with the Delaware Sierra Club states "The Sierra Club views the listing of the Red Knot under the Endangered Species Act as the first step in long road to recovery of this beautiful shorebird. More importantly it gives us the tools to protect the bird, its food sources and habitat while it is in the Delaware Estuary for a very short but very important time."

The organizations are seeking protection for the Red Knot under the Endangered Species Act. Since becoming law in 1973, the Endangered Species Act has protected more than 1,800 species from extinction. The law makes it illegal to "harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect" species listed as threatened or endangered, and also works to prevent habitat loss and degradation. The Act is credited with the on-going recovery of species like the Bald Eagle, the American Alligator, the Florida Manatee, the Whooping Crane and the Green Sea Turtle.

"The Endangered Species Act is a crucial tool not only for saving a species from extinction, but in aiding in its ultimate recovery," said Arthur Stamoulis, Director of Government Affairs for Clean Air Council, a regional environmental group. "Getting the Red Knot on the endangered species list is a key to its comeback. Being listed provides access to a wide range of habitat protection measures that would not otherwise be available."