

With recent requests for shorebird viewing information I thought I would take this opportunity to provide a little information to help visiting birders enjoy Delaware's many shorebird and horseshoe crab viewing opportunities.

Jean Woods from the Delaware Shorebird Project (and Delaware Museum of Natural History) will be posting regular updates about shorebird numbers as Red Knots and others arrive to dine on horseshoe crab eggs as they migrate from South America to the Arctic. In the meantime here is some basic information for those hoping to experience this unique phenomenon along the Delaware Bayshore.

Horseshoe Crabs spawned in good numbers on the full moon tides around 5 May. The new moon falls on Saturday, 19 May and for a few days on either side of this date horseshoe crabs should come ashore in huge numbers to spawn. Shorebird numbers should peak in the week following those high tides. So a visit anytime between 19 and 26 May should be rewarded with good numbers of Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Dunlin and Short-billed Dowitchers on the beaches (along with up to 10 or more additional species). If the rains don't fill the impoundments at the Wildlife Refuges and Wildlife Areas along the Bayshore – these sites should also be loaded with shorebirds as well – including several species that are rarely found feeding on horseshoe crabs on the bayshore. If the rains create large shallow puddles in agricultural fields, there may be more birds in the fields than in the impoundments. Below is my recommendation for places to visit where you should be most likely to see lots of shorebirds.

Horseshoe Crabs spawn at high tide with the heaviest spawn taking place at night. Birds are most actively feeding and easiest to see on the beaches during the day a few hours on either side of the high tide – though they may be present at any time and tide. The impoundments at Bombay Hook NWR are best at high tide when birds cannot feed in the marshes. Best viewing is high tide in the morning when the sun is at your back.

Dupont Nature Center at Mispillion Harbor

If Red Knot is your primary goal the place to begin your visit to the Bayshore is the Dupont Nature Center at Mispillion Harbor. This has historically held the highest concentrations of Red Knots in Delaware Bay in May. The center is reached by taking RT 36 east from RT 1 towards Slaughter Beach. Take the first left turn after the field full of goats on to Lighthouse Road. If you cross a drawbridge you have gone too far. Drive to the end of the road – the marshes on either side of the road are usually full of Seaside Sparrows with lesser numbers of the more reclusive and shy Saltmarsh Sparrow – being careful to drive slowly through any puddles in the road. The puddles are salt water and it is best not to splash too much of this on the underside of your vehicle. The Nature Center features a deck from which you can scan the small beaches around the harbor. These are usually covered with shorebirds and gulls. Other birds that may be seen here include Clapper Rail, American Oystercatcher, Black-necked Stilt, Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon. The Nature Center also features exhibits about Horseshoe Crabs and Shorebirds, aquarium tanks with live animals from local waters and a small gift shop.

Slaughter Beach

Slaughter Beach is just south of the Dupont Nature Center. The town is located on a narrow ridge of upland between the Delaware Bay and extensive tidal marshes to the west. Slaughter Beach can be reached from the north on RT 36 or from the south on Slaughter Beach Road (CR 224). Both exits are well marked on RT 1. The Slaughter Beach Fire Company (located just north of Slaughter Beach Road on

Bay Road) has a large parking lot, a picnic pavilion just off the beach and public restrooms that are open to the public. Between the Fire Company and the north end of town there are 7 roads that provide parking and access to the beach. Slaughter Beach has had incredible numbers of spawning horseshoe crabs in recent years. At low tide there are extensive mud flats just off the beach that can be covered with shorebirds. A scope is critical for birding here at low tide – especially during full and new moons when the flats seem like they go all the way to New Jersey! The best time to bird here is on a rising tide when you can find a spot to sit quietly on the beach and then let the rising tide push the feeding birds up the beach and almost within reach.

Bowers Beach

Bowers Beach is a small bayshore community located approximately halfway between Dover and Milford. To get there exit RT 1 onto Bowers Beach Road (there is a traffic light and good directional signage) and drive approximately 5 miles to the town. There is a large public parking lot near the Fish and Wildlife boat ramp that can be reached by turning right on to Flack Avenue. There are several access points in town to get onto the beach. Often the highest concentrations of birds are at the north end of town near the mouth of the St. Jones River.

Ted Harvey Wildlife Area and Kitts Hummock

Ted Harvey Wildlife Area has both beach access and two impoundments that can be filled with birds. Kitts Hummock is a small bayshore town with a public beach access. Both places can be good for shorebirds – though there is limited parking in Kitts Hummock. To get to these sites exit RT 1 on to RT 9 – or take RT 9 south past the Air Force Base – and turn on to Kitts Hummock Road. The entrance to the Wildlife Area is located on the right about 2 miles from Rt 9. To get to the beach access follow the dirt entrance road to the first dirt road on the left. Turn left and follow this road all the way to the end to a small gravel parking lot. Walk around the gate and follow the dirt road beyond to the bayshore. You can go either south towards the mouth of the St. Jones River or north towards Kitts Hummock. Often the largest concentrations of birds are to the south. Ted Harvey also has two impoundments that can also be good for viewing shorebirds. The North Impoundment is reached by the dirt road you pass on the left on the way to the beach or on the right on the way back out. This road ends at an unimproved boat ramp at the impoundment. A short trail leads to the left onto a pile of dredge spoils that provides a great view – that can accommodate a small group of people. The South Impoundment is reached by returning to the entrance road and turning left (if you want to go here first drive straight on the entrance road to the second dirt road on the left) and then turning left on the next dirt road. Follow this to the end to another boat ramp and small parking area. The best spot for viewing the impoundment is reached by walking around the gate and along the road to a high point that affords good views to both north, south and west across the salt marsh towards RT 1.

To get to Kitts Hummock take Kitts Hummock Road all the way to the end where there are a limited number of public parking spaces. Walk across Bay Drive to the beach access path. Once on the beach you can walk in either direction.

Port Mahon Road

Port Mahon Road provides one of the best sites to get very close to birds without having to get out of your vehicle. Unfortunately sea level rise and other coastal processes have eliminated much of the beach here – and efforts to protect the road have led to the loss of most of the rest. But there are

usually still good numbers of birds at this site. Be warned that the road is often strewn with debris left by the tides (especially after spring tides), very sandy in places and in others downright scary. Very low clearance vehicles should not attempt this road. The rocky debris along much of the roadside attracts large numbers of Ruddy Turnstones. Semipalmated Sandpipers are also usually here in big numbers. At high tide the semis often roost in big groups right in the road! Red Knots may be seen here – but in relatively small numbers in recent years.

Fowlers Beach – Prime Hook NWR

Fowlers Beach is located near the north end of Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge a couple miles south of Slaughter Beach. The quickest way to get there from RT 1 is to exit RT 1 onto Sugar Hill Road and follow this to the end. Turn left on to Draper Road. Turn right on to Fowlers Beach Road and follow it all the way to the end. The marsh at the end of the road can be alive with birds. In recent years Red Knots have roosted on the sand bars around the new inlet at high tide. The marsh on the north side of the road is one of the best places to see Clapper Rail in Delaware.

Bombay Hook NWR

Is located off RT 9 east of Smyrna. Take RT 9 north from RT 1 through Leipsic, drive over the bridge and take the first right Whitehall Neck Road. Follow this road to the refuge entrance. From RT 1 in Smyrna – exit at the South Smyrna exit and follow signs to the refuge. The headquarters has a visitor center, public restrooms and a bird sighting sheet. The impoundments can be good for shorebirds at any time – though high tide is usually best. Red Knots are rare here and you are not likely to see them. But with a scope you may see up to 20 other species of shorebirds. The Wildlife Drive is relatively easy to follow. Stop anytime you see birds.

Prime Hook Beach Road - PHNWR

The marsh and impoundments along Prime Hook Beach Road can also be good for shorebirds (though not Red Knots) and other marsh and water birds. The road is reached from Fowlers by turning onto Cods Road from Fowlers Beach Road. Turn left on to Prime Hook Road. There are a series of pull-offs along the road to allow easy viewing. Please use them. There is regular traffic along the road and the pull-offs provide safe viewing and keep your vehicle from obstructing traffic.

Broadkill Beach Road Impoundments – PHNWR

Broadkill Beach Road – RT 16 – is located a few miles north of Lewes/Rehoboth and south of Milford. There is a traffic light. Follow signs for Broadkill Beach and Prime Hook NWR. The entrance to the refuge Headquarters is located approximately two miles down on the left. The headquarters has public restrooms, several trails and a bird sighting sheet. To reach the Impoundments continue past the entrance road and around the 90-degree bend. There are two pull-offs on the right. Use them – but be careful of the steep drop-off on the passenger side. Vehicles travel at a fairly high rate of speed so be careful and get as far off the road as you can when viewing. A scope is essential here. Depending on water levels birds can be on either side of the road – though the north side is usually best.

Insects

Biting Flies, No-see-ums and Mosquitoes, depending on the weather and your personal tolerance level – can be an issue along the Delaware Bayshore in spring and summer. So far this year mosquitoes have been pretty tolerable. The current rains may cause their numbers to increase in the next week or so however. When the wind isn't blowing No-see-ums (biting midges) can be horrible. Stable Flies can also be quite numerous on the beaches – while Deer Flies and Greenhead Flies may be bothersome in marshes and around the impoundments at the Wildlife Areas and Refuges. Be prepared. Bring your favorite insect repellent. Maybe bring a lot of it.

Food, Accommodations

Lewes, Milton, Milford, Dover, Bowers Beach, Leipsic and Smyrna all have restaurants that are relatively close to the bayshore birding areas. A wide range of overnight accommodations are also available in Lewes, Milford, Dover, Smyrna and Milton(B&Bs).

For tide information the zoom into the Delaware Bay area on the map at the link below. Click on any of the red dots along the Bayshore, click on the tide prediction link – enter the dates you plan to visit in the 'Prediction Options' section and then click the 'Make Predictions Using Options' button and a chart will come up that shows the high and low tides for the dates you selected as well as the height of the tide in feet (our highest tides are typically between 5 and 6 feet) and the times of Sunrise and Sunset.

<http://tbone.biol.sc.edu/tide/worldmap.html>

LIMIT YOUR DISTURBANCE

As birders we have a responsibility to limit our disturbance on the birds we enjoy watching. This is never more important than when viewing migrating shorebirds along the Delaware Bay. These birds have just traveled thousands of miles, expended incredible amounts of energy and in most cases have lost nearly half their body weight. They need to feed nearly non-stop for almost two weeks to reach the critical weight required to continue the last leg of their migration to the Arctic, stake a claim to a territory and attract a mate. Any time they are disturbed, they have to stop feeding or resting and expend much needed energy. Watch shorebirds from a distance. The best way to view birds is to arrive near low tide, set up on the beach, and the birds will eventually be pushed to you. It is amazing how tolerant these birds can be of humans that sit still and stay relatively quiet. I have had Red Knots feed within feet of me when I have set up and allowed them to come to me.

Please enjoy our wonderful beaches and the fantastic birds and horseshoe crabs that grace us with their presence each spring

Hopefully I haven't left out any important information.