

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS



New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife passed an Access Restriction to Tidal Waters for Endangered Species Protection. Enacted in January 2026, it gives conservation officers the authority to cite those who violate beach closures, with fines ranging from \$250 to \$25,000. The protected zones span a designated map of specific critical habitats, stretching from the Villas north to Gandy's Beach.

## **Bayshore Boost**

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

*A recently enacted law should go a long way in providing shorebirds with needed food and nesting habitat in our region.*

Since 1997 Drs. Larry Niles and Amanda Dey have been coming to the New Jersey Delaware Bayshore beaches to lead an

international team of researchers who are studying shorebirds and their environs. In this year's May 16, 2026 blog Larry shared that, after many years of educating the public about the impacts of disturbance to feeding shorebirds and trying to limit access to beaches, New Jersey Fish and Wildlife finally passed a proposal that truly helps to protect shorebirds during their stopover here in our region.

To put this in context we first must understand a few aspects about shorebirds, a number of whom winter in South America and nest in the Arctic. They stop here on their migratory route to the north.

What drives migration is the need for food and safe breeding areas. The birds arrive in our area in May in conjunction with spring tides and the horseshoe crab spawn, allowing them to feast on horseshoe crab eggs along the beach front. Horseshoe crabs dig a nest and lay their eggs in the sand; then wave action and other crabs often unearth them. A clutch is about the size of a small child's fist, and only the ruddy turnstone (a shorebird) actually digs in the sand to access this food source.

Without an abundance of horseshoe crabs, birds can't access the eggs. By the time many of these migrants come to the

Bayshore they may be only half the weight needed to sustain the rest of their journey to the arctic. Food is fuel, and if they burn muscle instead of body fat they are in a precarious state. A successful nesting season is also contingent on arriving in arctic nesting territory in time for abundant insect hatches. Once there they disperse on the arctic tundra upon stony ground that camouflages their eggs as well as the incubating parent.

Back in 2021 Dr. Joanna Burger told me, "The study of the red knots of Delaware Bay is the longest-running continuous analysis of a migratory shorebird, where the same protocols have been employed for twenty-five years. And further, we have data from 20 years before that about population levels. So correlations can be made from the 1980s until today."

Such studies are the only means to track true population trends. Burger reminded me that the red knot is on the federal threatened species list largely because the most information was amassed on this specific species. However, all of its cohort species are equally imperiled – semipalmated sandpipers, ruddy turnstones, and sanderlings. And all will benefit from whatever protections the red knot receives since their habitat needs are similar.



*Laughing gulls, red knots, ruddy turnstones, and dunlin, all feasting on the Delaware Bayfront. Photo by, Joanna Burger.*

So what is the protection that went into effect this year? And why is it important? Migrating shorebirds are concentrated along the Delaware Bay beachfront, a rather thin strip of land in which the horseshoe crabs lay their eggs. Birds can use other food sources but the eggs are more densely packed with fat and protein, more easily digestible, and available in concentrations. Snails and other invertebrates have hard exoskeletons and require greater energy to digest.

Each time a bird flushes – and they flush en masse as a reaction to disturbances – they stop eating and burn energy, the precious energy they need to fuel their trip northward. For years volunteers and paid summer docents have been stationed at major access points to primary shorebird use beaches. Posted signs explain the perils of disturbing these birds. Conservation officers were called in when beachgoers were not cooperative, or when folks just ignored signage out of naivety, indifference, or belligerence. Some property owners challenged the legality of protecting endangered birds, whether migrants or the beach nesters on the Atlantic Ocean front (a different story but a similar premise).

An unleashed dog can run a very long distance/time, flushing hundreds of birds. Joggers, walkers, off-road vehicles,

peregrine falcons, and banner-flying planes have all created a serious problem for the birds and for those who try to protect their window of visitation.

Here is a passage from Larry's May 16, 2026 blog/diary that will give you some insight into a morning as a shorebird team member, and when disturbance raises everyone's hackles: birds, monitors, scientists, and visitors.

*"We left the Cape Shore because of fierce northwest winds that created breaking surf, shutting down the crab spawn, and pushing shorebirds into the various nooks and crannies of the bay, which makes them hard to find and catch. We rode north and west to Moore's Beach to attempt a catch of ruddy turnstones, knowing the small creek mouth would be sheltered from the strong winds. We arrived around 9 a.m., set our net, and soon after caught 81 birds, including 50 ruddy turnstones, 30 sanderlings, and one red knot.*

*"While we were working on the birds, banding and measuring body condition, drawing blood for a heavy metals study, and testing for avian influenza, we saw a man walking his dog out onto the beach. Birds flushed in all directions, especially from the unleashed dog, who was enjoying a bit of*

*chasing birds. As with all beaches on Delaware Bay important to shorebirds in NJ, the beaches are closed to beach users for most of the month so birds can feed without disturbance. We asked the man not to walk his unleashed dog on the beach, and he dismissed us and kept walking. I told him why the beach was protected. He said, "Call the cops then."*

*"And we did, and it worked, because NJ Fish and Wildlife proposed and approved what is very likely the most important regulations protecting migratory shorebirds in the nation. The new rule gives NJ Fish and Wildlife Conservation Officers the power to cite a person who refuses to abide by the beach protection rules, with fines ranging from \$250 to a whopping \$25,000. They published [a] map ...of all the areas, starting in the Villas and moving to all the beaches important to birds and crabs, up to Fortescue and Money Island."*

The shorebird study involves a catch and release, to gather information while causing no harm to the subjects. From his passage you get insight into what the team studies, and then the impact caused by a man and a dog breaching the barriers. With the new rule, conservation officers can impose fines on those who violate the protection notices, meaning that the rules now come with teeth to discourage such trespass.

New Jersey has been safeguarding the beaches since 2003, and the birds prefer protected to unprotected locations. The reason is two-fold: not only does protection result in less disturbance, but also NJ Fish and Wildlife deliberately selects the preferred beaches already used by the birds. The red knot is afforded special protections as a federally listed species, but the entire cohort of species mentioned by Dr. Burger benefits from the same protections because they are all accessing the same resource.

The Conserve Wildlife Foundation plays a major role in these efforts. Larissa Smith, whom many New Jerseyans know because she orchestrates a number of the eagle nest volunteers who monitor and protect our national bird, heads up the shorebird protection effort as well. She recruits volunteers and trains them, and with her guidance they rope off beaches, offer viewing areas to minimize disturbance, and explain to visitors the phenomenon of the shorebird and horseshoe crab interdependence. As with boardwalks in nature areas, birds begin to understand the defined boundaries not by signage but by people's activities. Often viewing is greatly improved, and Niles says often birds will forage right up to a barrier. But this doesn't mean that if someone walks beyond that point all the birds won't flush or be driven

away from accessible food resources. In fact they will.



*Bayshore signage on protected beaches explains the migratory route of shorebirds and the dates of restricted access. Photo: L. Smith*



*Dr. Larry Niles and others explain the shorebird horseshoe crab ecology to visitors. Photo: Dr. Joanna Burger.*

Niles further points out that beachfronts have been enhanced for the sake of birds as well as for people, and migratory birds make use of the beach during a far smaller window. *“And there is a practical side to this. The American Littoral Society and my group, Wildlife Restoration Partnerships, have, over the last 12 years, restored nearly all of these*

*beaches at least once with high quality sand. The projects are funded primarily by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation because of the shorebirds and horseshoe crabs. But the protection lasts only for the time they are here, one month. For the other 11 months, beaches are open for everyone to enjoy. It's only fair; the birds get what they need."* It is also important to keep in mind that while some bayfront areas are inaccessible for a short time, only specific beaches are involved, not the entire bayfront.

*"Shorebirds, horseshoe crabs, and the people who work to protect them and the people who enjoy the sight of them are grateful to NJ Fish and Wildlife for making this protection the law," Larry Niles.*

*See mapped areas below*

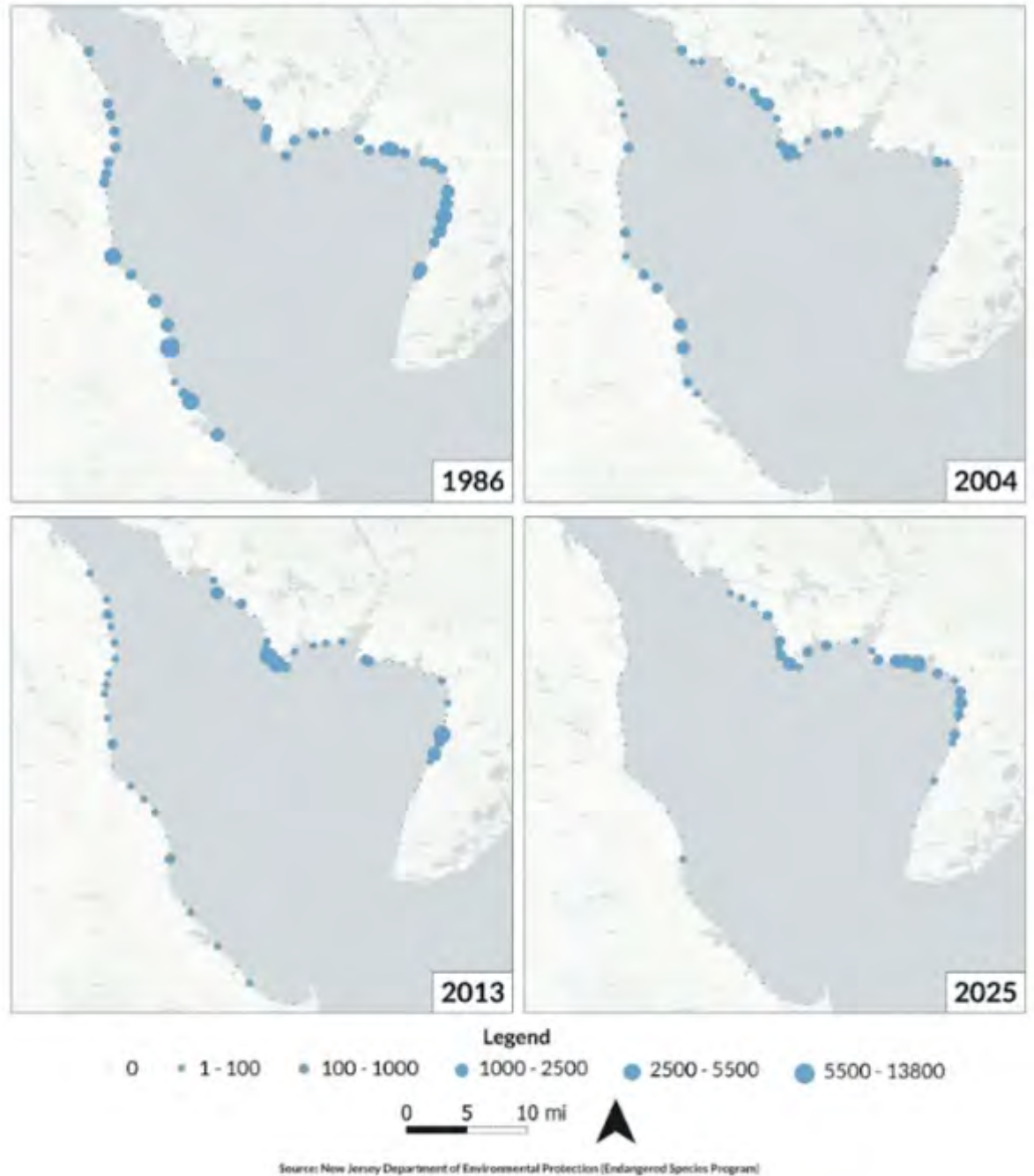
Source:

A Rube With A View, An online journal about wildlife. Larry Niles.



*This map by NJ Fish and Wildlife shows the beaches where the new rule protecting shorebirds will be enforced. The protected zones span specific critical habitats from the Villas north to Gandy's Beach.*

### Delaware Bay Aerial Survey Red Knot Count By Segment



*This map shows the distribution of red knots in past decades, demonstrating how shorebirds have responded to protections in the Jersey coastal areas. Map by Stephanie Feigin.*