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UNTAMED LOWCOUNTRY

These birds stopping in Hilton Head to rest in the middle of a 10,000-mile migration

BY JOHN BLOOMFIELD *SPECIAL TO THE ISLAND PACKET AND THE BEAUFORT GAZETTE*

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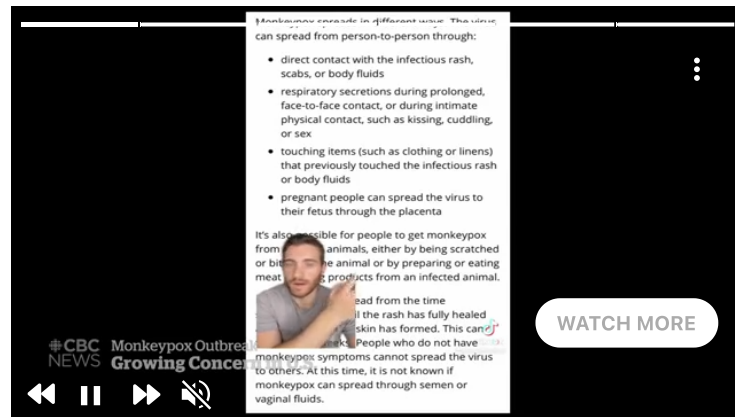
These are a few of the migratory shorebirds that pass through Beaufort County in their travels. BY JAY KARR

If you weren't looking for them, you might not know they were there at all.

Walk onto the sand at [Fish Haul Beach Park](#) on Hilton Head Island and make a right. A few hours after low tide, you'll see a sandbar a quarter of a mile away, jutting out into Port Royal Sound. On it will be a mass of shorebirds. You might just walk past them, taking them for granted, not realizing that each one has a story to tell.

Shorebirds are in constant motion, chasing springtime around the world.

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As endangered piping plovers leave our shores each spring to breed in the north, semi-palmated (meaning partially web-footed) sandpipers, globally threatened red knots and others move in for a time.

By summer, these birds will have gone north to the Arctic tundra, and the beach will be left to the laughing gulls, black skimmers, forster's terns and others that never stray far from our shores.

Much of this we know by observation. Every month since 2013, a team of birders from [Hilton Head Audubon](#) monitors these shorebird populations as part of the [International Shorebird Survey](#), a large-scale citizen science effort coordinated by Manomet, a global conservation organization that has been studying shorebird populations for 50 years.

It is not uncommon for our team to see more than 1,000 shorebirds during our monthly surveys along the beach.

In addition, birders today can report their sightings to a massive global database known as eBird, operated by the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#). We even learn about the movement of birds from nanotags and Doppler radar.

And then there are those tiny flags you might see on a bird's leg from time to time. Skilled birders with telephoto lenses and spotting telescopes will look for these bands. When matched against records maintained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, [bandedbirds.org](#) and others, you can learn where and when a bird was tagged, its approximate age and where it has been re-seen over the years.

Which brings us back to the red knot.

A bird with a name more apt for an artisan pretzel, the red knot sports an unassuming gray coat during much of the year, but it turns a vivid rusty-brick color in breeding plumage.

A few red knots choose to winter on our shores, but the majority are found far south in Tierra del Fuego, on the southernmost tip of South America. Genetically hardwired to head north with the first stirrings of springtime, they begin their annual trek up the South American coast, pausing to rest and refuel every 1,500 miles or so.

They are showing up on our beaches now — we saw more than 300 during our April survey — flecks of red jutting through their grayish feathers. In a few weeks, they will sport a more brilliant red.

By June they'll be gone, most stopping on the Delaware Bay for a frantic feast on the eggs of horseshoe crabs before completing the last leg of their flight to the Arctic.

Their annual trek north covers 10,000 miles, and after laying eggs and tending to their young, they turn around and do it all again.

Birds like 5C8, who was banded in 2011 on Harbor Island and has been sighted 47 times since then on Hilton Head, in New Jersey, Georgia and most recently in February at [Caladesi Island State Park](#) in Florida.

Or UK, banded in 2009 in Quebec and re-sighted more than 60 times in Canada, New Jersey and Delaware as well as Head Head. It was last seen in 2016.

Scientists, conservationists and bird enthusiasts have banded tens of thousands of birds like these since the mid-1990s, chronicling a perilously swift decline in their numbers.

Shorebird populations wintering in South America have dropped by 50 percent over the past decade alone.

The reasons are myriad, as is the gauntlet of threats the birds face on their circumpolar journeys — from poachers to increasingly violent storms, habitat loss and declines in food sources.

International Partnerships like the Atlantic Flyway Shorebird Initiative are working to stem the tide. Its members include Clemson University, Audubon South Carolina, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and a growing list of international partners.

You can also help: Be aware when riding your bike on the beach and follow posted regulations concerning dog behavior.

Greater awareness of the birds' plight is leading to better-coordinated conservation efforts. And those efforts fuel a cautious hope.

These birds are tough and resilient. The red knot, for instance, can live for up to 15 years, flying over 250,000 miles and outlasting a host of natural and man-made obstacles.

So the next time you see one, don't just think of it as a shorebird. It's a survivor.

John Bloomfield is a member of the Audubon South Carolina Advisory Board and vice president, Hilton Head Audubon.

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