

# CAPE MAY

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

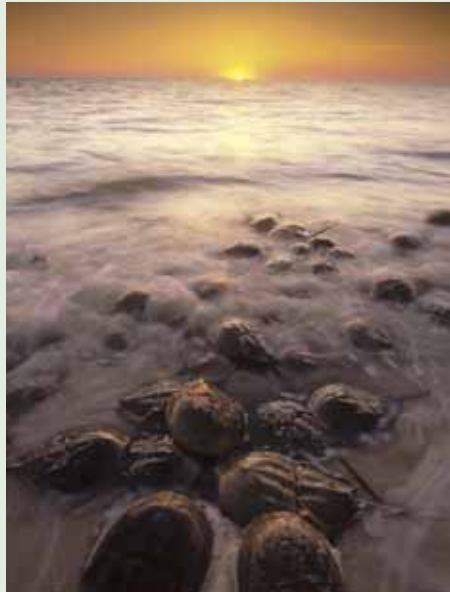
At high tide, with the full moon glowing on the shoreline of the Delaware Bay, a phenomenal event occurs each May. Crests of approaching waves begin to carry in one of Earth's most ancient living creatures—the horseshoe crab. This estuarine ecosystem, of which Cape May National Wildlife Refuge protects a portion, contains the world's largest spawning ground for horseshoe crabs. Where they gather, so do the shorebirds that sustain themselves on crab eggs during their long journey from as far as South America's Tierra del Fuego to breeding grounds in the Arctic.

Thousands of red knots gather on these beaches, making the protection of this area essential to their long-term survival—especially for the highly imperiled *rufa* subspecies. Red knots are joined by millions of other shorebirds like ruddy turnstones, dowitchers and sanderlings, making this ecosystem an internationally important staging area for shorebird migration and second in North America only to the Copper River Delta in Alaska. So special is this place that it has been recognized by five different national and international entities as a crucial location for birds.

This New Jersey refuge hosts an array of travelers on the Atlantic Flyway, including 100 species of songbirds, such as the wood thrush, ovenbird and northern parula. These neotropical migrants have suffered habitat destruction and fragmentation on both their breeding and wintering grounds, making the protection of migration habitat at this refuge essential. Each fall, Cape May is home to perhaps the greatest spectacle of migrating raptors in the United States, and thousands of visitors descend on the peninsula to witness the steady stream of hawks, eagles and falcons. On a good day, it is possible to see 100 peregrine falcons, 7,000 American kestrels and 150 northern harriers, among many other hawk species. In all, 317 species of birds can be seen here, including the largest concentration of American woodcocks on the Atlantic coast. Beyond birds, there is also a diverse community of 42 mammal species, 55 reptile and amphibian species and many fish, shellfish and other invertebrates.

The goal of the Cape May refuge, established in 1989, is to protect 21,000 acres of upland forest, forested wetland, saltmarsh,

Horseshoe crabs | © Frans Lanting/Minden Pictures



shoreline and grassland. That's nearly double its current 11,000 acres and a tough goal in the Jersey Shore's expensive real estate market—and in a political climate that has starved the refuge system of land acquisition funding. But an even more immediate concern for Cape May has been a lack of funding for staff—law enforcement in particular. Even though the refuge receives 60,000 visitors a year, its meager staff of five includes only one law enforcement officer, who splits his time with another refuge 60 miles away, and it has no visitor center. This lack of presence makes it hard to articulate the importance and fragile nature of this landscape and virtually impossible to police the people who

are illegally plowing through forests and uplands on all-terrain vehicles, tearing up vegetation and soils and disturbing nesting birds and other wildlife. Because the habitat at this refuge is so segmented by roads and private land, it is impossible to stay on top of this problem and protect the biological integrity of the refuge without more law enforcement—the Fish and Wildlife Service's most basic duty at refuges. In fact, the first staffer at the first refuge, Pelican Island, was a game warden. A 2005 comprehensive assessment by the International Association of Chiefs of Police found that refuge law enforcement capability was woefully inadequate,<sup>18</sup> inhibiting the Fish and Wildlife Service's ability to protect public safety and refuge resources—in other words, inhibiting the service's ability to carry out the reforms Congress mandated in the refuge improvement act.



Red knots | © Cliff Beittel