

# Famous red knot will wash away your blues

To readers: For maximum enjoyment, visit [delaware.newszap.com](http://delaware.newszap.com) and get the link to "The Delaware Bay Blues" in Andrew West's blog.

**By Andrew West**  
Delaware State News

DELAWARE BAY — Today's column offers a chance for a sing-along as we welcome the *rufa* red knots to the shores of the Delaware Bay.

Get a Texas blues rhythm going and read on. One, two ...

□□□

*I'm a rufa red knot flying north in the middle of May*

*I'm a rufa red knot flying north in the middle of May*

*My compass is set for the shores of Delaware Bay*

*Four days nonstop since I left Maranhão*

*Four days nonstop since I left Maranhão*

*I was a fat bird then but I'm flying on empty now*

□□□

Those are the opening lyrics to Phil Hoose's "Delaware Bay Blues".

Mr. Hoose will be in the area for the next few days, trying to spot a superstar in the curious world of the *rufa* red knots as they arrive for their annual feast on horseshoe crab eggs. The Delaware Bay is one of just a few stops in the birds' dangerous 18,000-mile annual journey that extends from Tierra del Fuego, south of Argentina, to

Northern Canada.

He hopes to see B95, a 20-year-old in a red knot population that has dwindled to around 14,000.

In July, Mr. Hoose's book — "Moonbird" — will be released. Its main character is B95 or "Moonbird" — a nickname researchers coined after calculating his lifetime flights have covered a distance equivalent to a trip to the moon and halfway back.

Delaware Bay researchers have found that the *rufa* red knots, which have stocky bodies, short black bills and varied plumage and color depending on age and season, can live 10 to 13 years.

It wears an orange band with B95 on its left leg. So far, B95 has eluded him.

"No, I never saw him," said Mr. Hoose. "It's very frustrating. I took part in several captures where nets were shot out over populations of knots, they were banded and weighed. Hundreds of red knots, but I never have seen B95. I've been



**"Moonbird" — identified by its orange B95 tag — is fairly easy to spot with its orange and black leg bands. The *rufa* red knot is 20 years old.**

Submitted photo/The Nature Conservancy

in the presence of people who have seen him an hour before or half hour later, but not me. Not me."

□□□

OK, so here's the chorus and your chance to join in:

You'll want to respond with a rousing "I need eggs" when the singer needs an answer from the crowd.

*I need eggs (answer: I need eggs) I need eggs (I need eggs)*

*I need hundreds & hundreds & hundreds & hundreds & hundreds of eggs*

*I need eggs (I need eggs) I need eggs (I need eggs)*

*I need dillions and scillions and thrillyans, Mispillions and drillions and pillions of eggs*

*Or else I'm never gonna lose (who-ooo) these Delaware Bay Blues*

□□□

Chances are good that Mr. Hoose will have a chance to spot Moonbird during the Delaware visit.

"B95 was seen on six separate occasions last May at Mispillion Harbor," said Mr. Hoose. "If you look back in the records of where he has been seen in Delaware Bay over the years, Mispillion is a favorite place.

He seems to like the Delaware side."

Dawn Webb of the DuPont Nature Center at Mispillion Harbor, near Slaughter Beach, said the red knots have arrived.

She was out watching them Friday. Saturday, hundreds of people visited the center for its Peace, Love and Horseshoe Crabs Festival.

The best bet is to go at low tide when the red knots have best access to the eggs. Today's low tide is at 3:42 p.m.

Mr. Hoose, in his research, said the mid-May visits are a sure bet.

The horseshoe crabs lay eggs above the high tide line when it is at its peak, just after the spring full moon, so subsequent tides do not wash them away.

The red knots do not stay long. They are here just long enough to bulk up and continue to their arctic breeding grounds. Mr. Hoose said each bird needs about 180 grams of eggs for fuel and some reserves.

"You could arrive there early in June and land on a snow field and could just be sitting there sipping down the fat from what you fed on in Delaware Bay, waiting for the ponds to thaw and release millions of mosquitos which is your next big meal," he said.

In the months preceding the flights to Delaware Bay, the red knots are found in South America,

primarily south of Argentina, where they molt and fatten up on spat — juvenile muscles that cling to ocean floor rocks — during low tides.

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*Flyin through the rain, pushing through the wind*

*Bound for the banquet on the beach at the end*

*I can fill up my tank to reach our breeding land*

*If a whole lot of crabs'll get to work in the sand*

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A friend, ornithologist Charles Duncan, shared the red knots idea some years ago with Mr. Hoose, knowing that he had an interest in birds and extinction.

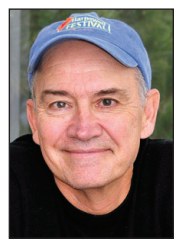
"I hesitated because I think it is most effective to write about a single character, to center a book about a single character. I kind of held off and looked around.

"But he called back one day and said he had been talking to an Argentine biologist, Patricia González, who told him about a bird, a single red knot who had been banded in 1995 as an adult, meaning that he had been in adult plumage and was at least three years old at the time and was still alive and they had just seen him again. That meant at that time that he was at least 17.



Andrew West

## From the Editor



Phil Hoose



# Editor

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"I hopped on a plane to Tierra del Fuego and hooked up with a team of biologists on the wintering grounds. The team of biologists allowed me to tag along and taught me to band," Mr. Hoose said. "I became totally intrigued by the biology of the red knot and by the challenges they face in their annual migration and came to admire the adaptability of these creatures."

Mr. Hoose said he marveled at how the robin-sized birds double their weight when it is time to fly somewhere and how they shrink various parts, such as gizzards and leg muscles, when it is time to move on.

"They're just incredible birds."

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*I need eggs (answer: I need eggs) I need eggs (I need eggs)*

*I need hundreds & hundreds & hundreds & hundreds & hundreds of eggs*

*I need eggs (I need eggs) I need eggs (I need eggs)*

*I need dillions and scillions and thrillyans, Mispillions and drillions and pillions of eggs*

*Or else I'm never gonna lose (whoo—ooo) these Delaware Bay Blues*

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There are only six to 10 stopping places for the red knots, said Mr. Hoose.

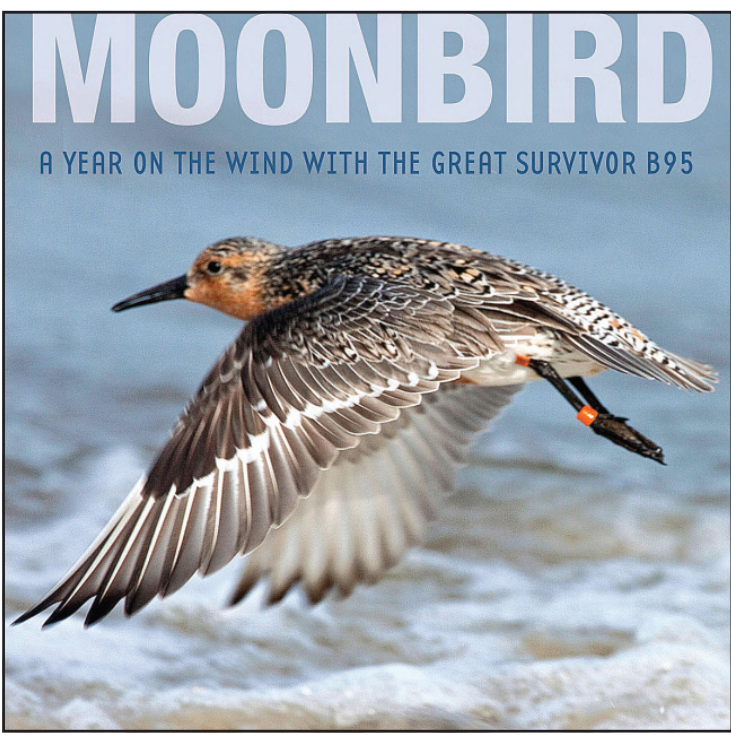
The paths of the birds are fairly predictable, but a date with his story's hero, B95, will be somewhat by chance.

"There's no guarantee you'll meet him because you can't make an appointment with wildlife," he said.

Nevertheless, he'll be looking through a scope from 50-60 yards away, trying to catch a glimpse.

Even though there will be thousands of birds on the shore, Moonbird will stand out.

"He has on his upper left leg the plastic band with the laser inscription B95. So if you're watching through a spotting scope, and you see a bird with an orange band on his leg, you start getting excited because that narrows the search down quite a bit. And then your job is to see what that number and letter



Phil Hoose's book "Moonbird" is released in July.

Submitted photo

combination is.

"And back in 1995, B95 got banded with a black band because they ran out of orange bands. They softened this black material they had with a camping stove and got it soft enough that they could

wrap it around some of the knots they banded on that day long ago. B95 is probably the only one left with a black band.

"If you see that, the black band on the lower right leg, then your heart really starts

thumping."

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Mr. Hoose, a Nature Conservancy staff member from Maine, said "Moonbird" can be pre-ordered at amazon.com.

The "face of extinction" is what B95 offers, he said.

"You definitely have a life form that is sliding toward the pit way too rapidly," said Mr. Hoose. "The hope is that the awareness of the plight of these shorebirds is growing every day."

"I think 'Moonbird' will help. It puts a face on a crisis. It's a valiant, admirable, heroic face."

"That's the hope — that enough people can be stirred that ways can be found at all these stopover places to help them."

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*I'm a rufa red knot flyin' north through the middle of May*

*Looking for a meal on the shores of Delaware Bay*

□□□

Andrew West is managing editor of the Delaware State News. Email [awest@newszap.com](mailto:awest@newszap.com).

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# 'PEACE, LOVE & HORSESHOE CRABS'



Along the shoreline a group of mostly ruddy turnstone and a few red knot birds feed during "Peace, Love & Horseshoe Crabs," a festival celebrating migrating shorebirds and spawning horseshoe crabs, at the DuPont Nature Center at Mispillion Harbor Reserve near Slaughter Beach on Saturday.

Special to the Delaware State News/Marc Clery



Author Phil Hoose prepares to view red knot with a high-powered spotting scope during "Peace, Love & Horseshoe Crabs."



Shorebird Identification Station volunteer Mike Hudson, 16, views red knot and other birds with a high-powered spotting scope.



Volunteer, Brenden McClanahan, 16, displays a small crab at the petting area.



A rare sighting of a royal tern.



A pair of Willets look for sand crabs during "Peace, Love & Horseshoe Crabs" at Slaughter Beach.



Hundreds of migrating birds take flight near four scientists monitoring the activity during "Peace, Love & Horseshoe Crabs."



An American bald eagle flies over during the event.