

Shorebird Migration by Robert Mercer

Shorebird migration is amazing! Some of these tiny birds travel huge distances between the locations they feel at home. Somehow, they know where the food is!

I became fascinated with banded shorebirds starting in 2019. Since then, I found and reported mostly Red



knots, but also a resident American Oystercatcher sports a band (bright red U5), Piping Plovers, some with legible flags other with clear patterns of colored bands looking like plover bling, Ruddy Turnstones, and a Sanderling.



I spend most of my time with the Red Knot, *Calidris canutus*, during my winter stays on Seabrook Island, SC.



The Red Knot subspecies found along the Atlantic flyway *C. c. rufa* is considered threatened. Some of these birds make the flight from the high Arctic all the way down to Tierra del Fuego on the most southern tip of South America, a flight of 9,000 miles each way. A few critically important stopping spots enable these birds to make this impressive migration. The shores of the Delaware Bay and its population of horseshoe crabs is one of the most important in North America.

It turns out a significant number of birds also stop along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. A subset of the Red Knots chooses not to make this huge migration, but to spend the winter along the Florida coast. How do scientists know that? From people like me (and you if you want) who spend time looking for flagged Red Knots and report the codes to the scientists.

Red Knots banding efforts include locations like Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Turks and Caicos Islands, Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Ontario, and Quebec. Every scientist who places a flag on a bird wants desperately to know where “their” birds go. Volunteers who go out on their own to record flag codes (resighting) provide a wealth of information for those scientists.

There are two main websites for reporting resighted birds. One sponsored by a number of scientists and their organization is www.bandedbirds.org. Once you have set up a profile and pinpointed a location, data entry moves fairly quickly. The beauty of this site resides in one’s ability to track where “their” bird has been. The other site is managed by the US Geologic Service: [Banded Bird Encounter Reporting \(usgs.gov\)](http://Banded Bird Encounter Reporting (usgs.gov)). If requested, they will send a certificate detailing who banded the bird originally, the date, and general location of where the bird was banded.

I made my first report on April 2, 2019, where I could identify a Red Knot with a lime green band with the code 4T4 (banded in DE on 5/16/17) and a bird with a dark green band coded EPJ (banded in MA on 8/24/18). From this little information, I knew that at least these two birds from Seabrook Island visited New Jersey in the spring and Massachusetts in the fall and both were probably fairly young birds. That piqued my interest, so I headed to Cape May on May 19, 2019, where I attempted to capture images of more flagged birds. I was unable to get a clear image of any of the Red Knots but did find and photograph flagged Ruddy Turnstone JPY (banded in NJ on 5/12/16) and MMT (banded in NJ on 5/29/16), also Sanderling C3t (banded in New Jersey on 5/25/11 – a bird at least 10 years old). I was hooked.



In the late winter, early spring of 2020, equipped with a new camera and a 300mm lens, I relished the challenge of capturing images of Red Knots sporting identification flags. I limited my search to birds found on Seabrook Island, SC, (a gated community with a restricted beach). Several of us spent hours tracking the Red Knots. On April 24, 2020, I was able to photograph a flying flock of Red Knots and using an app called “ImageJ,” counted 3,897 Red Knots and my image did not capture the entire flock.

During a period from mid-February when the first Red Knots show up on our island until Mid-May when the last one flies away, we recorded about 160 birds sporting readable flags. Unfortunately, Covid-19 also prevented me from traveling to the Delaware Bay Shore to track birds.

Out of curiosity, and having lots of time on my hands barricaded at home due to Covid-19, I created a spreadsheet where I tracked each of these birds. While far from scientific, there were telling trends and interesting factoids.

While I never saw this bird, there is documentation of a radio transmitter-ed bird leaving Seabrook Island in 2017 and fly directly to James Bay on the Hudson Bay in Canada. That demonstrates how this stopping spot is critical for some of the migrants. Of the 160 birds we tracked in 2020, nine were found that spring in New Jersey. For those, SC was a stopping spot. One stopped in Stone Harbor, NJ, in the fall and several stopped in MA for the fall. Who knows where they were the rest of the year. Even more, birds spent at least part of the winter along the Florida gulf coast between Dickmans Island near Marco Island, and Honeymoon Island north of St. Petersburg. Fort DeSota has the most sightings.

While many of the birds we found were at least a couple of years old, we did find one that was banded in 2004, one from 2005, and 4 that were banded in 2006. Those are some old birds! Twenty-one of our birds had been seen in Little Piskwamish, ONT, and three more on the Quebec side of James Bay, near the southernmost tip of the Hudson Bay. All these birds were seen in the fall.



One bird, lime EK> banded on Reeds Beach, NJ, on 5/14/19, seen again in Punta Caiman Falcon Venezuela on 3/15/20 showed up on Seabrook Island, SC, on 4/17/20. That is a long flight!



Another Red Knot lime KM5 traveled a lot! First captured and banded in Fortesque, NJ, as an adult bird on 5/19/07, spent the winter of 2008 in Tierra del Fuego. It was seen often over the next few years in New Jersey and Delaware for the spring and was last seen 5/14/13 until it popped up on Seabrook Island on 4/17/20. Think of how many trips from northern Canada to southern South America that bird made!

This year, something is different. The birds have been far less abundant with the maximum count as of April 3 being 1,200 Red Knots, but the birds are also more skittish. Is it because the beachgoers can once again go out on the beach without as much fear of the Covid-19 virus or have the food source for the Red Knots—Donax clams—diminished (my hypothesis). I plan to get out more often during the next month hoping to score some more finds.

Anyone with a halfway decent camera can join the fun of finding identifiable birds. If you do, see a bird sporting a flag or colored bands, take a picture if you can. If a phot is not an option, but a good view is, attempt to record as much detail as you can—color of the flag or bands, location on the leg by thinking of the bird just as one would a person (upper left, upper right, lower left, lower right), and which colored band is higher. Here is another opportunity for birders to turn their hobby into something valuable for science!