

Shorebird Hunting Workshop Summary and Supplemental Information

Fourth Western Hemisphere Shorebird Group Meeting, 13 August 2011
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada.

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Background and Purpose

Legal and illegal hunting of some shorebirds breeding in North America occurs throughout their annual ranges. However, shorebird biologists generally lack adequate information to determine if hunting pressure could negatively affect shorebirds at a population level. To begin to unravel this complex question, we sought information on shorebird hunting throughout the island and continental nations, countries, commonwealths, and territories of the Caribbean Basin.

A SurveyMonkey[®] questionnaire was developed, and information was solicited from partners throughout the Caribbean Basin. Preliminary results were discussed at the annual meeting of the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds (SCSCB), held in July 2011, and presented at the Burnaby meeting referenced above. To date, nine countries/islands have responded, and those where hunting was perceived as a threat included: Barbados, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad & Tobago.

In this workshop, we reviewed information collected through the SCSCB questionnaire for the Caribbean Basin, reviewed harvest of shorebirds in other regions, and developed a few actions needed to be taken to understand the scope of shorebird hunting and find conservation solutions where appropriate. Besides information presented at the workshop, some additional background information is provided here. Below are regional summaries and identified actions to be taken.

U.S. and Canada – Rick Lanctot, Brad Andres (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), Jennie Rausch (Canadian Wildlife Service)

Canada and the U.S. permit a sport harvest of two shorebird species — the American Woodcock and Wilson's Snipe. Other shorebird species in the U.S. are protected under the Migratory Treaty Act, and the season has been closed for the Black-bellied and "Golden" Plovers since 1926 and for the Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs since 1927. Seasons and bag limits are set annually for the woodcock and snipe. The American Woodcock are hunted currently in 37 U.S. states, where season lengths vary between 30 and 45 days, depending on the region, and the daily bag limit is three birds. An open season for the Wilson's Snipe is provided in 49 states and Puerto Rico; the season lasts about 105 days and the daily bag limit is eight birds. Canada's season varied between 61 and 144 days, and a daily bag limit of 10 birds is permitted.

In the U.S., an average of 123,000 hunters annually harvested 290,420 woodcocks, and 28,800 hunters harvested 98,600 snipes between 2006 and 2010. Because of population declines, U.S. hunting-season frameworks for the American Woodcock have become more restrictive over the

last decade. In Canada, annual harvest was much less and averaged 24,214 woodcocks (taken by 3,415 hunters) and 6,411 snipes (taken by 1,259 hunters).

The Migratory Bird Treaty between the U.S. and Canada and Mexico was amended in 1997 to allow for a spring subsistence harvest. Harvest and egg-gathering is permitted for 18 species of shorebirds in Alaska. The season is generally open between 1 April and 31 August, with a 30-day closure at the height of the nesting season; no daily bag limits are set. Although a subsistence harvest survey reaches 25,000 households in villages throughout Alaska, information on the shorebird harvest is unreliable. In 2009 for example, harvest of Bar-tailed Godwits was reported as 1,658 birds and 281 collected eggs; about 1,000 eggs of smaller species were also harvested. Shorebirds are also taken as target practice for children and young adults learning to use their firearms. Subsistence harvest of shorebirds in Canada is thought to be minor, although some birds are likely taken in the spring. Like Alaska, kids in Canada use shorebirds for target practice.

ACTION: Develop a reliable subsistence harvest survey in Alaska that provides more reliable information on the harvest of Bar-tailed Godwits and other large shorebirds – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Bird Management, Region 7.

Barbados – Eric Reed, Cheri Gratto-Trevor (Canadian Wildlife Service); Wayne Burke (Birdlife International)

Barbados has a tradition of shooting shorebirds that began with the colonists in the 17th and 18th century. The current shooting swamps on Barbados were artificially created and can attract large numbers of migrant shorebirds during inclement weather. The open season for shorebird shooting is 15 July – 15 October and there is no daily bag limit. Several species are protected (the Upland Sandpiper, Hudsonian Godwit, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Ruff) and there has been voluntary agreement by hunters to reduce harvest American Golden-Plovers and stop the harvest of Red Knots. Harvest varies among years and shooting swamps, but the main harvested species include the Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Greater Yellowlegs, and American Golden-Plover.

The Canadian Wildlife Service is working with Birdlife International's Barbados Program and the Barbados Wild-Fowlers Association (BFWA) to gather current information on the harvest and develop a model of sustainable shorebird harvest. To date, members of 50% of the shooting swamps have agreed to furnish their harvest data. Birdlife International has raised funds to establish and manage the Woodbourne Shorebird Refuge, some shooting swamps are maintaining water levels year round to benefit migrant and resident birds, and the BFWA has helped fund maintenance of non-shooting reserves.

ACTION: Finish harvest assessment and recommendations – Eric Reed, Canadian Wildlife Service; Birdlife's Barbados Program; Barbados Wild-Fowlers Association.

ACTION: Investigate possibility of purchasing/leasing abandoned shooting swamps as refuges and cultivate potential investors – Birdlife International-Caribbean Program

Guadeloupe/Martinique – Anthony Levesque (National Hunting and Wildlife Agency)

Like Barbados, shorebird hunting has a long tradition on Guadeloupe and Martinique. About 14-15 species are harvested on these two islands by approximately 1,400 hunters on Martinique and 3,000 hunters on Guadeloupe. The season runs from July to January, and no daily bag limits are set. Shorebirds that are shot are eaten by hunters. Wetlands are not managed for shorebird hunting in Guadeloupe, but are sometimes on Martinique. The hunting pressure in the French West Indies may be greater than on Barbados. Composition of harvested species in the French West Indies is likely similar to that on Barbados. Although there are no reliable estimates for the magnitude of the harvest, a single hunter has been known to harvest 500-1,000 shorebirds per season. Unfortunately, one of the Whimbrels satellite-tagged on the coast of Virginia was shot on Guadeloupe in September of 2011 after circum-navigating a tropical storm. Plans are being developed to more accurately determine the magnitude of the shorebird harvest in the French West Indies. As with French Guiana, La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO), the Birdlife International partner in France, has targeted Martinique as a site to increased conservation of birds in French Overseas Departments.

ACTION: Work with French colleagues to assess harvest on Guadeloupe and Martinique – Anthony Levesque.

ACTION: Create greater awareness with hunters about the potential impacts of hunting by providing information on shorebird population sizes and trends and their conservation status – Anthony Levesque.

ACTION: Identify ways to increase enforcement of existing regulations and restructure current regulations – Anthony Levesque, Birdlife International-Caribbean.

Suriname/Guyana/French Guiana – David Mizrahi, New Jersey Audubon Society

Since 2002, it has been illegal to harvest any shorebirds in Suriname, but there is little enforcement of the closed season. Law enforcement is hampered by limited resources (e.g., working boats, gasoline), and, as a result, several tens of thousands of shorebirds are trapped and shot each year. A survey conducted by the government and Dr. Arie Spaans in 2006 indicated that virtually all shorebird species occurring in Suriname were illegally hunted and trapped in some quantity, with the Lesser Yellowlegs and Semipalmated Sandpiper being the dominant species. The survey also described an illegal food trade of shorebirds, including selling to local markets. Shorebirds are harvested by shooting, netting, and the use of choke wires. Many shorebirds are taken by Guyanese fishermen working in Suriname. Shorebirds are harvested legally in French Guiana and Guyana, although the magnitude of the harvest is unknown. Recently, the New Jersey Audubon Society, through bandedbirds.org, received the report of a color-flagged Red Knot (banded in Delaware Bay) being shot in Mana ricefield in French Guiana. Rice fields and other impoundments are prevalent in French Guiana and Guyana, whereas Suriname's coast is mainly mudflats and much of the coast is legally protected as Nature Reserves or Multiple Use Management Areas. Three coastal areas in Suriname are designated as sites of hemispheric importance in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN), and it is likely and it is likely that hunting occurs in at least two of them,

Bigi Pan and Coppenamemonding. Education and awareness programs have begun along the coast of Suriname, and a hunter training program is being developed.

ACTION: Through a grant from the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the New Jersey Audubon Society is working with law enforcement entities within the Suriname Forest Service, Nature Conservation Division, and with Dr. Arie Spaans, Friend of STINASU, to develop and implement strategies and provide support for increased law enforcement activities to curtail illegal shorebird take – David Mizrahi (Otte Ottema/Arie Spaans, STINASU).

ACTION: Contact La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO) about their conservation program for French Overseas Departments – Brad Andres.

ACTION: Provide better assessment of shorebird harvest in Suriname, French Guiana, and (secondarily) Guyana.

ACTION: Determine current harvest regulations in French Guiana, and if appropriate, recommend re-structuring of regulations.

Other Regions and General Actions

Participants in the SurveyMonkey[®] poll from Trinidad & Tobago identified harvest as a threat to shorebirds. Hunting birds on both islands is popular, and hunters generally target larger waterbirds. There about 750 hunters on the islands, the season ranges from November to February, and there are no bag limits. More specific information is needed to determine the magnitude of the shorebirds harvest on Trinidad and Tobago.

It is important to realize that France permits harvest of 16 shorebirds in their European Departments. There, seasons and bag limits are set regionally, and most shooting of shorebirds (except for woodcock and lapwing) occurs from hides along the Atlantic coast.

Lastly, Birdlife International-Americas is in the process of collecting additional information on the hunting of waterbirds throughout South America.

ACTION: Summarize SurveyMonkey[®] results and determine where else additional information on shorebird harvest and/or management actions are needed – Anthony Levesque, Birdlife International.

ACTION: Follow-up with Trinidad & Tobago to determine if additional assessment is needed or to identify potential conservation actions – Birdlife International-Caribbean.

ACTION: At the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species (COP10) meeting in November 2011, get a representative (Argentina?) to push other Western Hemisphere countries, including France for its overseas departments, to elevate the conservation status of Red Knots, particularly to allow no harvest – Birdlife International-Americas.