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Birding event seeks to raise \$100K to save habitat

Donor will match pledges for annual Bird-A-Thon

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In about a week, birders from near and far will flock to First State parks and backyards to spot as many winged creatures as they can, and not just for the joy of it.

They hope to raise raising enough money to expand protections of coastal habitat near Slaughter Beach.

"There's no place on Earth like the Mispillion Harbor Reserve in May," said Bill Stewart, founder and chair of the Delmarva Ornithological Society's annual Delaware Bird-A-Thon. "And that's not my sentiment. That is a fact."

Starting in May, thousands of shorebirds arrive along the shore of the Delaware Bay as horseshoe crabs prepare to slowly creep onto the sand to lay millions of protein-packed eggs. They provide the fuel for some birds' spring migration. Some species, like the threatened Rufa red knot, travel thousands of miles for those eggs and attract visitors from all around the world.

The 13th annual Delaware Bird-A-



A tagged red knot walks on Slaughter Beach in 2005. Birders are hoping an upcoming count will raise enough money to expand protection of coastal habitat in the area. GARY EMEIGH/THE NEWS JOURNAL

Thon begins Saturday and runs through May 12, coinciding with some of the bay's most popular visitors.

Much like a walk-a-thon or similar fundraisers, people are asked to make

financial pledges for each bird species recorded in a single 24-hour period during the Bird-A-Thon.

This year, every dollar up to \$100,000 will be matched by an anonymous do-

nor, the organization said. Details are limited regarding the property the group hopes to purchase, but it will expand protections at the existing 74-acre Mispillion Harbor Reserve that provides vital habitat to coastal critters such as blue crabs, diamondback terrapins and dozens of bird species.

"Once everything is secure and the properties and habitats are safely protected, then the next thing we want to do is create a point of destination," Stewart said.

Future plans could include a research facility and other amenities for the Slaughter Beach area, he hints.

If the group can raise the matching \$100,000 this year, it will break records for the event.

Since the first Bird-A-Thon, the event has raised about \$450,000 to protect nearly 2,000 acres of land. Last year, birders raised about \$60,000 to help purchase a piece of property to expand protections at the 600-plus-acre Passmore Farm property near Townsend.

For more information or to sign up, go to delawarebirdathon.com.

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