

ENVIRONMENT

Shorebird populations are declining, conservationists say. Cape Codders help with 'blitz'



Denise Coffey Cape Cod Times

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Shorebird populations in the Western Hemisphere, especially long-distance migrants, have seen significant declines in recent decades. Manomet's International Shorebird Survey gathers data crucial for conservation efforts, including identifying important habitats and informing policy. Local conservation measures, like beach use regulations in Orleans, protect nesting shorebirds and benefit other migratory species.

ORLEANS — The sun hadn't broken through the clouds when Keegan Burke and Liana DiNunzio reached [Priscilla Beach](#) on the morning of Wednesday, Aug. 6. They walked past a flock of tree swallows, noted [coyote](#) tracks in the sand and a man raking shellfish in the distance. They set up their tripods with spotter scopes. Their day of identifying and counting long distance migrating shorebirds had begun.

“Shorebirds have declined about 30% in the last 50 years,” DiNunzio said, referring to the Western Hemisphere. “Long-distant migrants are even worse, a 50% average decline for them.”

DiNunzio, a shorebird biologist with [Manomet Conservation Sciences](#), and Burke, a natural resources officer who runs a shorebird program with the town of Orleans, were taking part in [Manomet's International Shorebird Survey](#). The survey is a nine-day count of shorebirds in North and South America, and locally known as the 3rd annual Massachusetts Shorebird Blitz.



Manomet has been holding the survey for 51 years. The data collected from those surveys has been used to identify flyways and areas where migrating birds stop to feed and rest. It has been used to create national shorebird conservation plans and sites for the [Western Hemisphere Shorebird](#) Reserve Network. It has bolstered partnerships with landowners and policy makers that go beyond state and national boundaries.

Using the Cape to launch

Burke pointed out a juvenile [piping plover](#). The feathery puff of a creature was skuttling about on short legs below the wrack line. It would be another week before it could fly, he said.

“Piping plovers are a good indicator species of the health of the habitat,” he said. “Plovers are showing a nice increase in Massachusetts.”

The town has put up fencing to protect the birds’ nests, [established regulations regarding vehicle use on beaches](#), prohibited the flying of kites and drones, and prohibited dogs from beaches in the summer. Those protections have been good for other migratory birds, DiNunzio said.

“We have a really good system for protecting our nesting birds which helps these migrants,” DiNunzio said. “We always remind people to think about how far they traveled, and they are here to get good rest, have enough space and areas to feed in so they can prepare for their next journey. A lot of birds will use the Cape to launch off for transatlantic flights to South America.”



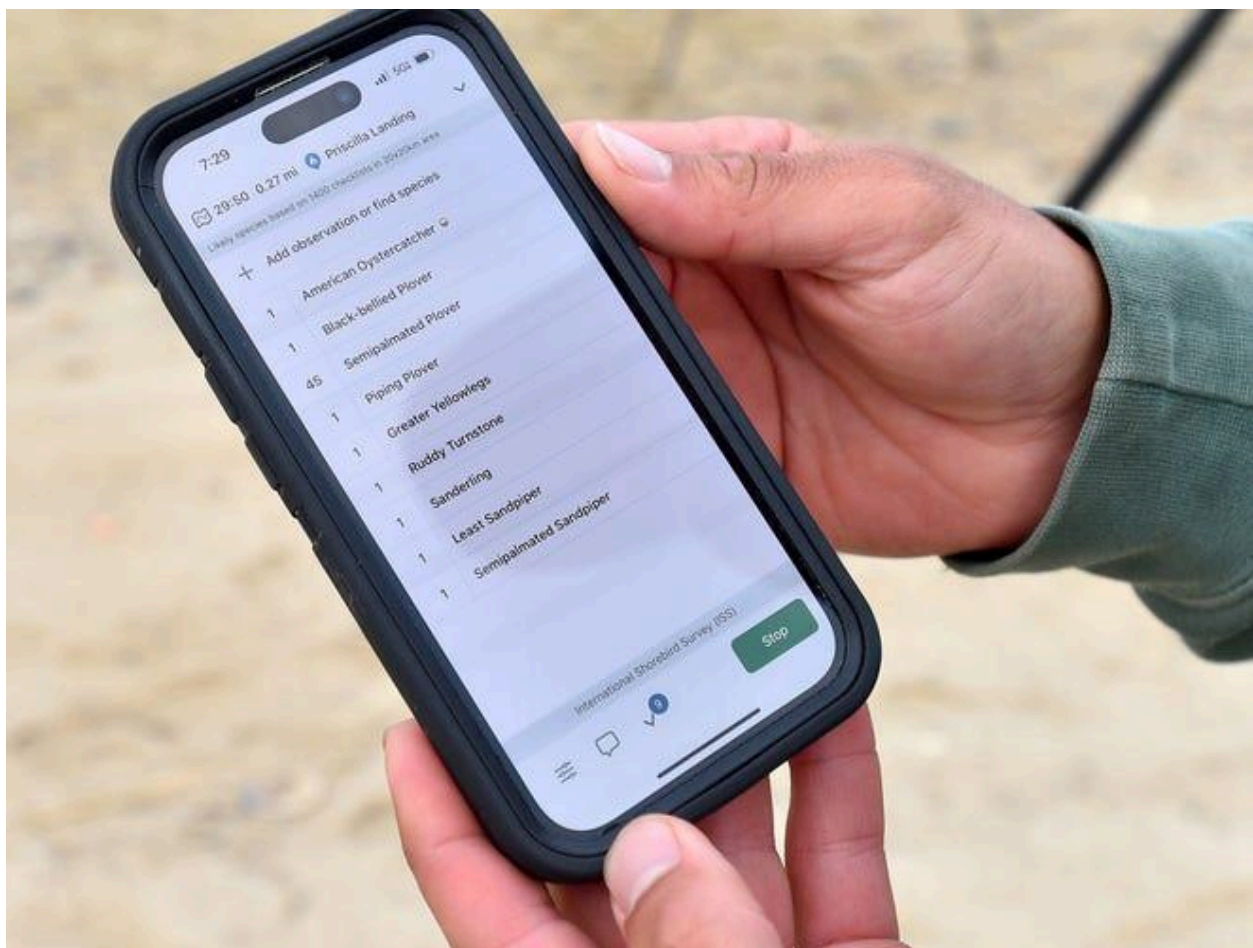
Considering the flights of migratory birds

Considering their size, wingspan and weight, the flights some birds take are nothing short of amazing. Some birds fly 9,000 miles a season, according to DiNunzio.

A six-inch long [semipalmated sandpiper](#) with a wingspan of 14 inches will migrate from breeding grounds north of Hudson Bay to areas in Central South America. They weigh one ounce, about the weight of a pencil.

A four-ounce [short-billed dowitcher](#) with a wingspan of 19 inches will migrate from the subarctic tundra of Alaska and Canada to the Gulf Coast and northern tip of South America. So will the [ruddy turnstone](#) with its 20-inch wingspan.

The long flights require suitable locations for the birds to rest and refuel. They are dwindling because of habitat loss, sea level rise, and coastal development. Birds face challenges in both their nesting and wintering grounds. Juveniles have a high mortality rate to begin with.



In search of the 'biggest problems'

“It’s hard to pinpoint where the decline is happening,” DiNunzio said.

“Once we figure out where they are going, we’ve had people on the ground checking out sites. Maybe hunting is a big problem, or oil spills, developments. We try to work together as a network to figure out where the biggest problems are and how to fix them.”

The [American oystercatcher](#), a stunning shorebird with black head and bright orange bill, is a case in point. One was standing in a crowd of cormorants holding their wings to dry. There’s been a big effort to restore the oystercatcher populations in Massachusetts, DiNunzio said. Manomet has been working with organizations in the state to monitor and recover populations. A recent count showed a 45% recovery in the last 15 years.

Burke decided to head north to continue counting birds on the 2.5-mile spit of land. DiNunzio’s next stop was Pleasant Bay where she would continue her survey. Another volunteer was paddling a kayak through Nauset Estuary to identify and count birds there. The two made their way back to the main beach with gear in hand.

“Oh, here we go. Red knots,” Burke shouted as six of the orange-breasted sandpipers flew overhead. “That was the highlight. That was beautiful.”

Denise Coffey writes about business, tourism and issues impacting the Cape's residents and visitors. Contact her atdcoffey@capecodonline.com