



Bulletin 106

Conflicting priorities and lost opportunities

In February this year, I joined colleagues from the US, Canada and Chile on a trip to Bahia Lomas on the main island of Tierra del Fuego to carry out studies on the still rapidly declining *rufa* population of the Red Knot. The importance of the knot studies cannot be doubted. The population has plummeted from 150,000 twenty years ago to probably less than 20,000 now. For the past decade, *rufa* have been studied at most of the sites they use throughout their migration over 120° of latitude: in Tierra del Fuego, in Patagonia, Lagoa do Peixe in southern Brazil, sites along the coast of Maranhão in northern Brazil, Florida to Delaware Bay in the United States as well as extensive and intensive studies on the breeding grounds in arctic Canada. In consequence, we have a tremendous amount of information about these birds; they are counted twice a year, in January and May; we know about their main non-breeding sites; we know their stopover sites and most of the food they take; we know their breeding densities and their survival. Especially, we understand the importance of horseshoe crab eggs, their main food resource at their final spring stopover in Delaware Bay. Sadly, however, despite the huge effort and resources that have been put in, *rufa* knots continue to decline. But it may not be all gloom. Only recently, stringent measures have been put into effect to conserve horseshoe crabs so hopefully when they recover the knots will do so as well.

But what was I doing in Tierra del Fuego studying such a well-known species as the Red Knot when perhaps I should

have been concentrating on any of the three shorebirds that only occur in that part of the world and which are hardly known at all: Magellanic Plover, White-bellied Seedsnipe and Fuegian Snipe?

Of these, Magellanic Plover is the only one for which there is any kind of population estimate, but that was made 30 years ago. Now it is considered to be declining and near threatened. Nobody has a clue as to the size of the populations of White-bellied Seedsnipes or Fuegian Snipes. Moreover, in comparison with most shorebirds of the Northern Hemisphere, the ecology of all three of these species is hardly known at all.

Perhaps one reason why long-distance migrants receive rather more attention than more sedentary species is that they tend to be the subject of international agreements and everyone feels an obligation to pull their weight. Another is that long-distance migrants often spend part of the year in relatively more populated wealthier countries where there are more people and resources to study them. But if these things are true, shouldn't we recognise them and take steps to redress the balance? Wetlands International, through its periodic *Waterbird Population Estimates*, takes a lead by drawing our attention to little-known populations. It is up to us to respond by taking hold of whatever opportunities arise (like the opportunity I have just missed!) to get to grips with these often fascinating species.

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