NEW WORLD SECTION

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SURINAME DEDICATES FIRST HEMISPHERIC SHOREBIRD RESERVES IN SOUTH AMERICA

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The development of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) underwent a major advance on 4 March 1989, when Suriname became the first country in South America to join the network, with the dedication of three coastal wetland sites as Hemispheric Reserves. Under the WHSRN scheme, sites in the Hemispheric Reserve category represent areas of exceptional importance, supporting 250 000 shorebirds or 30% or more of a species population.

Recognition of the outstanding international importance of the coast of Suriname for shorebirds has come about through the work of Arie Spaans (1978) and more recently the South American Shorebird Atlas Project of Guy Morrison and Ken Ross (1989). The aerial surveys of the later project covered nearly all of the coastline of South America to provide a unique continental perspective from which to judge the significance of a given area for wintering shorebirds. Morrison & Ross (1989) found that Suriname supported over half (52%, or 1.53 million) of the total shorebirds they counted around the entire coastline of South America. The country was particularly important for small sandpipers, (mainly Semipalmated Sandpipers *Calidris pusilla*) with 58% of the continental total for small species, but also supported very significant numbers of a wide range of medium-sized (32%) and large (18%) species (see Figure 1).

Areas which received Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve status included the Wia Wia Nature Reserve, in the eastern part of Suriname, the Coppename-monding Nature Reserve, involving areas around the mouth of the Coppename and Saramacca rivers, and the Bigi Pan Multiple Use Area, in the west of the country (see Figure 1). These areas were twinned with the Hemispheric Reserves which have been created in the Bay of Fundy in Canada (Hicklin 1988a, 1988b), in recognition of the critical role each plays in the life cycles of shorebirds moving between them (Morrison 1984).

The sites on the coast of Suriname are not only important for shorebirds, but also provide key habitats for a range of wading birds and waterfowl, including the Scarlet Ibis *Eudocimus ruber*, herons, egrets and ducks. The Wia Wia Nature Reserve was established in 1961 and enlarged in 1966 to 36 000 hectares, and contains extensive mudflats, shoals, mangroves in various stages of succession, herbaceous swamps, shallow lagoons and forested sand ridges. The Coppename-monding Nature Reserve was established initially as a bird sanctuary in 1953 and enlarged to 12 000 hectares in 1966 when it became a Nature Reserve; in 1985, it was listed as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, to which Suriname is a signatory. The area contains extensive mudflats, mangroves in all stages of succession, and some shallow lagoons. The Bigi Pan area and adjacent Wageningen swamps in the west of the country comprise some 68 500 hectares of tidal flats and mangrove forests, bordered inland by shallow lagoons and swamps. The area has been administered as a Multiple Use Management Area by the Ministry of Natural Resources since 1987.

The dedication ceremonies were held at the headquarters of the Suriname Forestry Service in Paramaribo. The event was especially significant not only because it brought protection to some of the most important coastal shorebird habitats in South America, but also because of the unprecedented level of political recognition it received. The ceremonies were attended by the President of the Republic of Suriname, Ir. Ramsewak Shankar, three cabinet ministers, including the Minister of Natural Resources, Drs. Pretaap Radhakishun, and the Ministers of Justice and of the Armed Forces, several ambassadors, consular representatives and members of the diplomatic corps, and representatives of the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and, of course, the WHSRN. After an introduction by Stan Malone, Head of the Suriname Forestry Service, there were speeches by Dr. Guy Morrison (CWS), who announced a $40 000 grant from the Canadian International Development Agency for the creation of management plans for the existing coastal reserves, Dr. George Finney (WHSRN Council, CWS), Dr. Arie Spaans (WWF-Holland), Dr. Henk Reichart (WWF-USA) and the Minister of Natural Resources. The speeches stressed the value of coastal wetlands not only for wildlife but for human populations, and drew attention to the value of wildlife as indicators of the health of these important ecosystems. After the unveiling of a plaque commemorating the occasion by the President of Suriname, there were various presentations, including a computer and software for the Suriname Forestry Service from WHSRN.

The ceremonies were followed by a full program of field activities, starting with an aerial survey of the Wia Wia Nature Reserve area and eastern coast of Suriname. A visit to the Coppename-monding Nature Reserve produced many memorable moments for the northern visitors, including the sight of the Canadian and Suriname flags flying together in front of the newly constructed field headquarters, a thatched, open-sided hut built on stilts to allow the tide to flood underneath, and

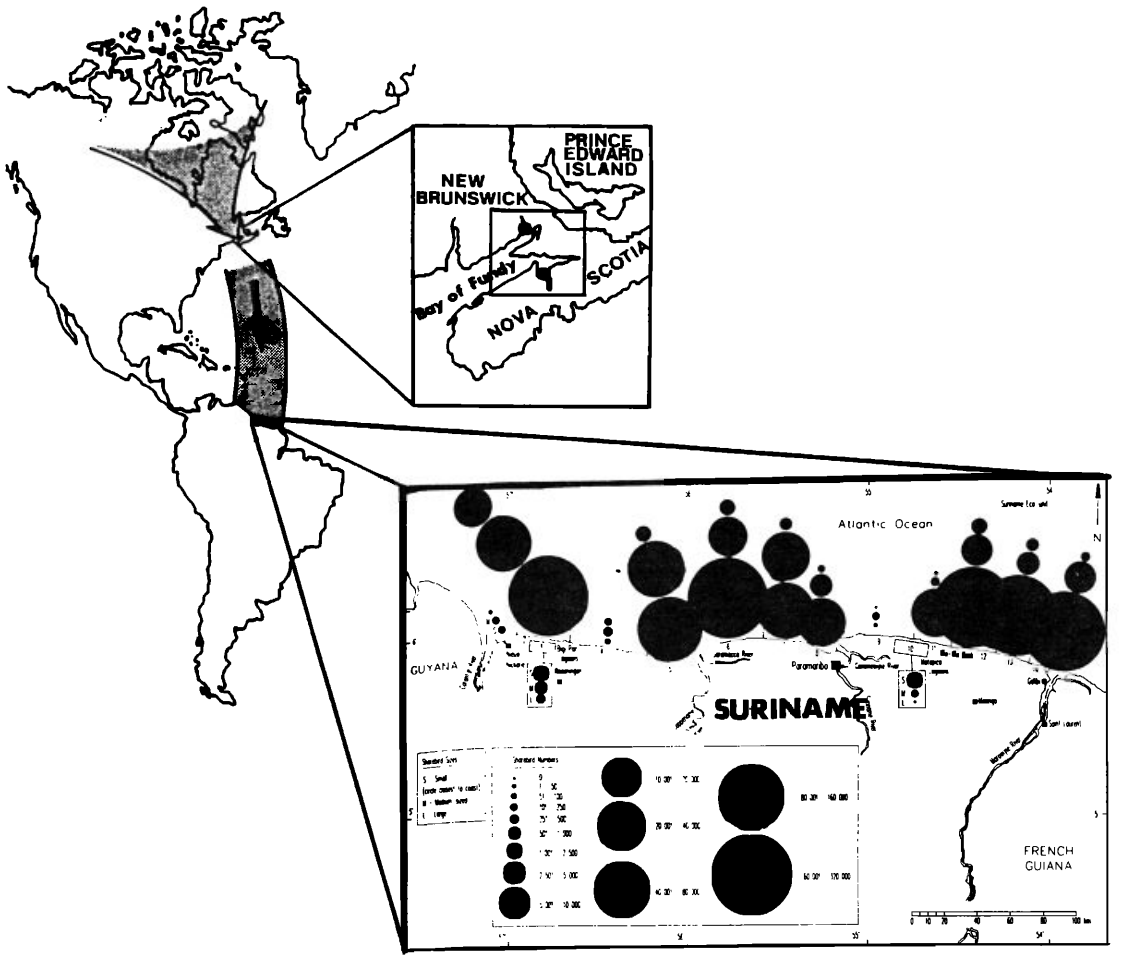

Figure 1. Three new Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserves along the coast of Suriname, showing relative numbers of Nearctic shorebirds (from Morrison & Ross 1989), now 'twinned' with the Bay of Fundy WHSR dedicated in 1987 (New Brunswick section) and 1988 (Nova Scotia section).

glimpses of flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers lurking amidst the roots within the mangrove forest at high tide. A visit to the field station at Matapica produced four sightings of white-flagged Semipalmated Sandpipers which had been banded in the Bay of Fundy. Following the field trips, Dr. Arie Spaans, of the Research Institute for Nature Management in the Netherlands, gave a course in shorebird identification and banding at Matapica.

The superbly organised ceremonies and field trips in Suriname marked not only a most auspicious start to the WHSRN network in South America, but represent the continuation of an active and impressive conservation record and effort by Suriname.

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