

## Shorebirds and noodles

*In Guyana, sandpipers and plovers  
serve as an important food source  
for people in the densely populated coastal villages*

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**G**LISTENING SHALLOWS, illuminated by a tropical sunrise, turned the muddy coastline into an expanse of gold. The tide was right and the trappers were working. As I gazed east and west along the shore I could see the boys, singly or in pairs, spread a few hundred feet apart. Some were literally lying in the mud while others flipped themselves frantically as they faced the turbid Atlantic. All had the same purpose, to catch as many shorebirds as possible. Indeed, they were working hard to capture a plentiful and nutritional food source. Ninety-four percent of the people making up the population of Guyana live on the four per cent of the land that comprises the coastal plain. Birds and fish are therefore the major sources of protein for the people of these densely populated villages.

I was in the village of Rose Hall, about 110 miles east of Georgetown, the Guyanese capital. For a week I had been travelling the coast visiting the coastal villages to learn about the nocturnal hunting of Common and Roseate terns as part of a continuing study for the Massachusetts Audubon Society. But, for a few hours this bright morning I was fascinated by the method of harvesting shorebirds by these energetic youngsters.

Most were in their early teens, although one of the boys I spoke with was just ten. He told me they hunted nearly every day, and during August, September and October when the birds are migrating, up to 75 may be caught in a day, but this was rare. The hunting method is simple and effective. A wooden stake is pounded into the mud and a flexible steel wire tied to it, two-three feet from the ground. This wire is about one hundred feet long and rests on the mud perpendicular to the shore line. A stick handle is tied to the other end. The wire handler lies motionless and quiet, his partner awaits near the stake, or may run over the

flats waving and whistling, hoping to flush the birds toward his friend. As sandpipers fly parallel to the shore, the waiting partner jumps to his feet at the right moment and whips the wire up, down, back and forth, effectively knocking down birds, often decapitating or maiming one or more birds in the flock. The birds are quickly gathered up, secured to a wire and the waiting begins again.

As I watched these boys, I pondered

over memories of my younger days. How many mornings I had fished hard and long both for fun and to contribute to the dinner table. I argued with myself as I stood on this mud flat over how much "less civilized" it was to whip-wire a Willet than catch a large-mouthed bass, what with tolerance to pain and such things. I could only document it and think, "When in Guyana. . . ."





Fig. 1. A pair of hunters watches and waits for shorebirds to approach the wire which lies on the mud between them. The crouching lad holds the wire; the other end is tied to a stump near his partner.



Fig. 2. As single birds or small flocks streak past, the wire is frantically whipped about, often maiming, decapitating the shorebirds, or otherwise bringing them down.



Fig. 3. Proud hunter shows the benefits of a muddy morning's work. Of the 14 birds harvested, 7 species of shorebirds were represented. Albion Bank, Guyana.

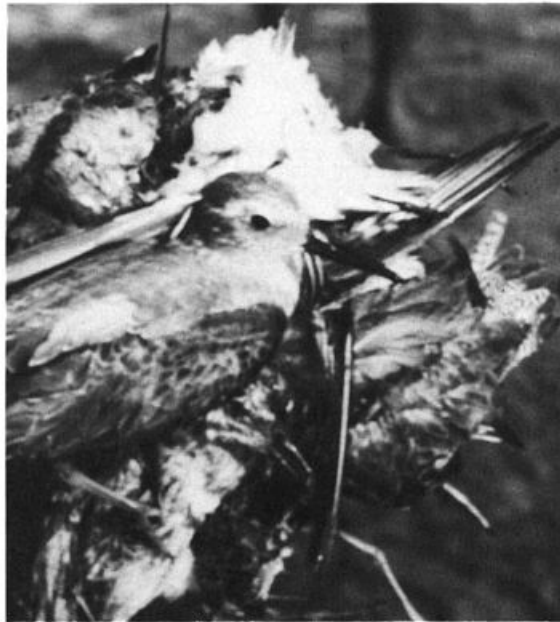


Fig. 4. A closer look at the battered prey. Semipalmated Sandpipers, Red Knot, Stilt Sandpiper and Lesser Yellowlegs make up a portion of this day's meal.



Figure 5. These four boys had a total of 55 birds. Note the neatly rewound wire, ready for the next "hunt." I was invited to clean the birds and share the meal.



Fig. 6. The birds are quickly skinned; only the entrails are discarded. The strong-tasting meat is chopped up, bones and all, then fried, and served in a bowl with noodles, and eaten with the fingers. All photos/Peter Trull.