

FEATURE ARTICLES

DECLINES IN WINTERING POPULATIONS OF RED KNOTS IN SOUTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

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Abstract. Surveys of the North American race of the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*) on its main wintering areas on the coasts of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego (Argentina and Chile) showed a dramatic decline in the wintering population: totals in 2003 were about 30 000 compared to 67 500 in the mid-1980s. Numbers at the principal wintering site, Bahia Lomas, fell by approximately 50%, from 45 300 in 2000 to 22 000–25 000 in 2002–2003. Numbers at peripheral sites on the coast of Patagonia declined dramatically, decreasing 98% compared to numbers in the mid-1980s. The results showed that declines at core sites did not result from birds moving to other places within the known wintering (or other) areas, but reflected a general population decline, with most birds now restricted to key sites in Tierra del Fuego. This phenomenon may explain why long-term declines noted elsewhere have only recently become apparent at key wintering areas. Possible reasons for the declines are discussed. Banding studies in Delaware Bay have shown that in recent years an increasing proportion of Red Knots is unable to gain sufficient weight for migration to the breeding grounds. This is likely due to reductions in their main food resource, eggs of the horseshoe crab *Limulus polyphemus*. The resulting increase in mortality could account for the magnitude and severity of the declines we observed.

Key words: conservation, declines, population, Red Knot, shorebirds.