

Horseshoe crabs returning soon

By Greg Layton, Milford Chronicle

Here they come. In about two weeks, hundreds of thousands of horseshoe crabs will return to Slaughter Beach. And whether Milford-area residents consider them ugly monsters capable of little more than drawing



flies, or whether they respect them as a vital link in a global food chain, the crabs won't go unnoticed.

According to a state-organized survey, at least 259,590 horseshoe crabs spawned on Slaughter Beach in 2004, far more than the 100,740 that spawned on Kitts Hummock beach or the 9,465 that spawned on Broadkill Beach.

In fact, some researchers believe Slaughter Beach is the

most important horseshoe crab breeding ground on the planet, said Glenn Gauvry, president of Ecological Research & Development Group.

ERDG is the only environmental group dedicated to protecting horseshoe crabs. Now based in Nassau, ERDG is eyeing a home closer to Milford and Slaughter Beach, he said. Getting closer to the action simply makes sense.

Horseshoe crab eggs, which look like green BBs, are an important source of nutrition for shorebirds migrating between South America and the Arctic each May.

After flying nonstop for days, the birds might die if they couldn't find enough eggs on the Delaware beaches when they arrived in May.

Pharmaceutical companies use horseshoe crab blood for medical tests, and watermen use the crabs as bait.

Nothing, the watermen say, attracts eels and conchs half as well as horseshoe crab bodies.

All of which makes Slaughter Beach a pretty important place. And researchers have finally figured out why the big, brown crabs prefer the beaches closest to Milford better than other beaches, said Dave Carter, who manages Delaware Coastal Programs, a state agency.

First, a jetty at the mouths of the Mispillion River and Cedar Creek protects spawning horseshoe crabs from rough waves, he said.

Second, Delaware Bay water off Slaughter Beach is just salty enough for the crabs to thrive, he said.

Third, the state of Delaware has pumped lots of sand onto Slaughter Beach over the years, and the crabs appear to prefer beaches with nice sand, he said.

"The species probably evolved over millions of years to reproduce at place like this, near the mouths of rivers," he said.

But Slaughter Beach residents haven't always appreciated the most numerous of their spring visitors.

Mr. Gauvry said that at one time coastal residents were just as likely to toss beached horseshoe crabs into the dunes to kill them as to pitch them back into the bay — often slinging them by their fragile tails in the process.

Now Slaughter Beach residents have joined folks in three other Delaware Bayside communities to declare their town a horseshoe crab sanctuary.

When ERDG visited Slaughter Beach in 2004 to ask its beachfront property owners to ban the collection of horseshoe crabs on their property, only five of about 200 property owners refused, said Bill McSpadden, a year-round Slaughter Beach resident.

Watermen once collected horseshoe crabs along Slaughter Beach to use as bait in conch and eel traps.

The town's love for horseshoe crab has grown so much that in 2004 its town council adopted the crab as its official town animal, said Mr. Gauvry.

A horseshoe crab image now appears in the letterhead of every official town correspondence.

An eco-committee

Mr. McSpadden said that within the coming month an organization called E.Co.S.B. — short for "Ecological Committee of Slaughter Beach" — will meet for the first time.

In addition to encouraging town residents to set stranded horseshoe crabs right-side-up, E.Co.S.B. will get involved with rescuing stranded porpoises and protecting diamondback terrapins crossing the road.

"For some of us, it's almost like a ritual," he said. "We get up each morning and walk up and down the beach, flipping the horseshoe crabs."

Dozens of Slaughter Beach residents flip crabs during the spring, he said. E.Co.S.B. will also put out a newsletter, teaching town residents how to protect local natural resources, Mr. McSpadden said.

Flipping horseshoe crabs is important because they aren't very adept at righting themselves after waves have knocked them over, said Mr. Gauvry.

Studies show that about 10 percent of the adult horseshoe crab population dies after crawling onto beaches to breed and getting trapped, he said.

But flipping horseshoe crabs isn't the only way to protect them. The state of Delaware has limited the number of horseshoe crabs watermen may collect in the course of a year.

It has also banned certain types of dredging during the time the horseshoe crabs are near the shore.

Although ERDG opposes the use of regulations to protect horseshoe crabs, it has endorsed the use of mesh bags to protect the crabs watermen use as bait, said Mr. Gauvry.

The bags prevent small animals from picking apart crab carcasses as quickly and allow watermen to use fewer crabs — as much as 50 percent fewer in some cases, he said.

ERDG designed the mesh bags and paid Kent-Sussex Industries in Milford to manufacture and distribute them.

It has also organized educational poster contests, classroom curriculum, a Web site and meetings among researchers, state leaders and watermen.

Still, Mr. Gauvry said that protecting horseshoe crabs will need a lot more work and require the participation of watermen.

"They need to be involved," he said. "They're the real experts. They know the conditions better than anyone."

Waterman weighs in

Albert W. Adams III, a waterman based in Slaughter Beach, said watermen do know the conditions in the Delaware Bay better than anyone.

They watched the horseshoe crab population shrink in recent years, but after 20 years of commercial fishing he's never seen more young horseshoe crabs come up in his conch dredges than he has this year.

"Yeah, they dropped off," he said. "But they're coming back strong." He said that winds out of the northeast kept the water around Delaware Bay beaches choppy during horseshoe crab spawning in recent years.

That could explain why surveyors saw fewer crabs ashore, he said. "It's like everything else," Mr. Adams said. "They're cyclical."

Most watermen want to make sure horseshoe crabs remain plentiful — after all, nothing else he's tried has drawn nearly as many eels and shellfish, he said.

But most watermen object to state regulations that have forced many watermen to go out of business or to diversify the species they pursue, he said.

Although in the 1960s and 1970s Slaughter Beach was home base for 10 to 12 watermen dedicated to catching fin fish with gill nets, the eight to 15 waterman there now go after all sorts of seafood, from crabs to conchs, he said.

Many Delaware Bay watermen have turned to dredging and trapping conchs, which few local waterman pursued before 1985, just to stay in business, Mr. Adams said.

Although conch-trapping requires a lot of horseshoe crabs for bait, it is profitable because of the high demand for conch meat in Hong Kong, he said.

"It's a never-ending battle," he said. "We have to move from one thing to another just to survive."

Mr. Gauvry said that an ERDG-organized summit among watermen, researchers and state officials in March 2004 generated lots of ideas, enthusiasm and hope, but progress appears to have stalled.

"It generated a lot of positive energy," he said. "But none of the initiatives we discussed was ever funded. We haven't really had the money to follow through."