

Fundy Shorebird Project:

Protecting Globally Important Wetland Habitat Through Local Partnerships

By Donald Sam & Glen Parsons



From Top: Greater Yellowlegs and Dunlins rest near shore. Shorebirds in flight with Blomidon in the background. Interpretive Panels describe the Ecology of the Minas Basin.

The Bay of Fundy, renowned worldwide for its magnificent tides, is also one of the most important shorebird migration stopover areas in the world. Several species of shorebirds, including 75 per cent of the world's population of semi-palmated sandpipers (over two million birds), migrates through the upper bay each year.

Beginning in early summer, the shorebirds move from their breeding grounds in northern Canada to their wintering areas in northern South America. Along the way they stage a pit stop in the upper Bay of Fundy to seek refuge and find food hidden in the vast mudflats that are exposed during low tides. Over 20 different species of shorebirds frequently pass through the Fundy region.

Mud flats, and more specifically the creatures that live in mud flats, are why shorebirds return to this region. The Fundy mud flats are particularly productive, loaded with living creatures such as mudshrimp, mudworms, snails, and countless other types of invertebrates, all of which are potential prey for hungry shorebirds. Each bird stays in the area for about 10 days, long enough to double its weight in fat reserves to fuel the 4,000 km non-stop flight to their wintering grounds.

At high tide the landscape changes, the mudflats are covered with water and the birds are unable to feed. During this time shorebirds congregate and rest (roost) in tight flocks on the sand and gravel beaches and occasionally on inland fields. Most roosting sites along the Bay of Fundy are prone to disturbance by humans. The migration period for shorebirds in the Bay of Fundy coincides with the migration of thousands of vacationers and other coastal users into the area.

The availability of undisturbed roost sites is important to the conservation of shorebird energy reserves. If the birds are unable to find suitable roosting sites, they waste precious energy by flying constantly.

The Minas Basin in Nova Scotia, and Shepody Bay in New Brunswick, are the two most important sites in the Bay of Fundy for migratory shorebirds. Both sites are wetlands of global significance, and are designated as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance and as a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN). The sites are also designated Important Bird Areas (IBA) due in part to the large concentrations of migratory shorebirds that pass through the area. At any given high tide during the fall migration there may be hundreds of thousands of shorebirds at the major roost sites in these areas.

The conservation and availability of these undisturbed roosting sites is critical for the long-term survival of these shorebirds. During the late 1990s, a committee of scientists and wildlife managers from Atlantic Canada prepared the Atlantic Canada Shorebird Conservation Plan. This plan declares that the protection of high quality roosting and foraging habitats is a conservation priority.

In 2000, under the auspices of the Eastern Habitat Joint Venture (EHJV), the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, in close partnership with other government and non-government organizations set out to advance the Atlantic Canada Shorebird Conservation Plan. The partners received funding through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) to support shorebird conservation in the Bay of Fundy in what was to become known as the Fundy Shorebird Project.



Robin Marshall (front, right) of the Kings Community Economic Development Agency speaks at the opening for the shorebird interpretation facility at Evangeline Beach.

The primary objectives of this endeavour were to secure shorebird habitat in the upper Bay of Fundy and raise public awareness for shorebird conservation.

Since 2001, the Fundy Shorebird Project has been working to conserve high quality shorebird habitat in the upper Bay of Fundy, both in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Efforts in Nova Scotia have focussed on conserving shorebird habitats in the Minas Basin. The project developed a program of community-based stewardship, public education and land securement, all of which has made the upper Bay of Fundy a more 'shorebird-friendly' zone. The Fundy Shorebird Project has successfully negotiated the protection of approximately 486 hectares (1200 acres) of land in the upper Bay of Fundy.

Much of what we know about shorebirds and their migration through the Fundy region has been discovered from studying the sandpipers at Evangeline Beach near Grand Pré. Today, the community of North Grand Pré remains central to shorebird conservation in Nova Scotia.

The local community has work closely with the Fundy Shorebird Project to establish a network of land stewards that help monitor shorebirds during the migration period. Many of the landowners have entered into stewardship agreements with the project. By doing so, these landowners agree to observe land use practices on their land, as well as on the beach, that support the conservation of shorebirds.

The opening of a shorebird interpretive facility at Evangeline Beach this past June will keep the message of shorebird conservation in the limelight along the Minas Basin. This facility is the first in Nova Scotia to showcase the magnificent migration of shorebirds through the Minas Basin and is the result of a partnership between the Fundy Shorebird Project and various provincial, municipal and community-level partners.

Up to now, the annual phenomenon has been one the area's best kept secrets. Today, visitors to Evangeline Beach can now quickly learn about this astounding natural wonder. A series of bilingual interpretive panels guides visitors through the ecology of shorebirds, mud flats and the Minas Basin. The panels are installed on an outdoor viewing platform that overlooks the beach. Visitors can also view a documentary about the shorebirds. The film, entitled 'Stewards of Evangeline Beach,' was shot locally and is available for viewing, free of charge, in a theatre located next to the outdoor facility in the Evangeline Beach Canteen.

The Fundy Shorebird Project has provided a big boost to the conservation of shorebirds and other coastal wildlife in the upper Bay of Fundy. Ongoing conservation efforts stemming from the Fundy Shorebird Project are helping to ensure that Fundy's mud flats remain vigorous and capable of fuelling the annual shorebird migration far into the future.

Donald Sam is the Fundy Shorebird Project coordinator for Nova Scotia. Glen Parsons is the Eastern Habitat Joint Venture manager at DNR's Wildlife Division in Kentville.



*Top: Shorebirds at Evangeline Beach.
Below: In the foreground over 80,000 shorebirds huddle tightly together at their high tide roost.*

All partners and supporters who contributed to the many successes of the Fundy Shorebird Project over the past three years deserve thanks.

Project Partners:

- Ducks Unlimited Canada
- Eastern Habitat Joint Venture
- Environment Canada/
Canadian Wildlife Service
- New Brunswick Department
of Natural Resources
- Nova Scotia Department of
Natural Resources
- The Nature Conservancy
- The Nature Conservancy
of Canada
- The Nova Scotia Nature Trust
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- Wildlife Habitat Canada

Project Supporters:

- AtlantexCreativeWorks
- Blomidon Naturalists Society
- Creative Action Digital Video
- Kings Community Economic
Development Agency
- Land of Evangeline Family
Camping Resort
- Maritimes & Northeast
Pipeline
- Municipality of the
County of Kings
- North Grand Pré
Community Association
- Nova Scotia Tourism Council
- Robert Lyon Graphic

For more information about the Fundy Shorebird Project please contact Donald Sam at the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources (902) 679-6160.