

# Bulletin 111

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## Editorial

### WPE4

A warm welcome to the latest, fourth edition of the fount of all knowledge relating to the size and trends of wader populations worldwide: *Waterbird Population Estimates* edited by Simon Delany and Derek Scott and published by Wetlands International (available from the Natural History Book Service, 2–3 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5XN, UK; [www.nhbs.co.uk](http://www.nhbs.co.uk)). It is the product of Wetlands International's huge continuing effort to gather the best information available on waterbird populations and is the *sine qua non* of all efforts to conserve them. Sadly, however, it makes depressing reading: nearly half of populations for which trend data are available are decreasing, only one in six are increasing; many populations are small and vulnerable; threatened species were worse off in 2006 than they were when the last edition was published in 2002.

### DISTURBING DECISION BY THE U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Among the more catastrophic declines documented by WPE4 is that of the *rufa* subspecies of the Red Knot which breeds in the Central Canadian Arctic and winters in Tierra del Fuego. Fifteen years ago, *rufa* was thought to number 100,000–150,000 and as late as 2001 the authors of the *United States Shorebird Conservation Plan*, perhaps rather optimistically, estimated there were still as many as 170,000. Now, WPE4 puts the figure at 20,000–25,000 and notes that “the precipitous decline continues”.

In the United States, *rufa* is already listed as a threatened species in the State of New Jersey and as a species of special concern in South Carolina. In 2005, a petition was presented by conservationists to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to list *rufa* as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. As a result, the Service commissioned a status review and on 12 September 2006 they announced their response to the petition. They said that they had determined

that the Red Knot “warrants listing” as threatened or endangered, but this “is precluded by species with a higher listing priority”. They therefore announced that the Red Knot had been designated as a “candidate species for listing” and explained that “although candidate species status does not provide any regulatory protection under the Endangered Species Act, the Service recommends that all federal agencies funding, authorizing, or conducting actions that may affect the Red Knot or its habitat give full consideration to the species in project planning”.

This is a highly unsatisfactory situation. If a species warrants listing, it should be listed!

The only conceivable reason why listing the Red Knot might be “precluded by species with a higher listing priority” is that listing would necessitate the expenditure of money and resources that are needed for species that are even more threatened or endangered.

To be fair to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, it is subject to fiscal constraints that prevent it from listing more species than its budget will allow. Therefore the criticism is not levelled at the Service but at the system within which it has to operate. But this is the United States, the globe's richest and most powerful country! This is a dreadful example to set the rest of the world; especially Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Canada which are also visited by *rufa* and where legal efforts to ensure its protection are currently in force or under active consideration.

Most countries produce official lists of species in need of special protection. Usually, listing has negligible cost, but it does mean that a species cannot be shot and there is at least recognition that it is important to conserve its habitat. Beyond that, yes, conservation costs money and it is sensible to allocate it among listed species according to need. Therefore it is recognised that conservation actions for some listed species may be precluded by shortage of funds, especially in poor countries. But not to list because of the likely cost implications gives out entirely the wrong message!

Humphrey Sitters