Rapid population decline in red knots: fitness consequences of decreased refuelling rates and late arrival in Delaware Bay

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Most populations of migrant shorebirds around the world are in serious decline, suggesting that vital condition-dependent rates such as fecundity and annual survival are being affected globally. A striking example is the red knot (Calidris canutus rufa) population wintering in Tierra del Fuego, which undertakes marathon 30 000 km hemispheric migrations annually. In spring, migrant birds forage voraciously on horseshoe crab eggs in Delaware Bay in the eastern USA before departing to breed in Arctic polar deserts. From 1997 to 2002 an increasing proportion of knots failed to reach threshold departure masses of 180–200 g, possibly because of later arrival in the Bay and food shortage from concurrent over-harvesting of crabs. Reduced nutrient storage, especially in late-arriving birds, possibly combined with reduced sizes of intestine and liver during refuelling, had severe fitness consequences for adult survival and recruitment of young in 2000–2002. From 1997 to 2002 known survivors in Delaware Bay were heavier at initial capture than birds never seen again, annual survival of adults decreased by 37% between May 2000 and May 2001, and the number of second-year birds in wintering flocks declined by 47%. Population size in Tierra del Fuego declined alarmingly from 51 000 to 27 000 in 2000–2002, seriously threatening the viability of this subspecies. Demographic modelling predicts imminent endangerment and an increased risk of extinction of the subspecies without urgent risk-averse management.

Keywords: conservation; demographic collapse; horseshoe crab; migration; shorebird; stopover ecology

1. INTRODUCTION

Key questions in the study of the evolution of migratory strategies in birds are (i) what are the fitness consequences of variation in the timing of arrival at highly seasonal breeding sites, and (ii) to what extent are survival and reproduction dependent on the amount of nutrient stores accumulated at the last stopover site in the annual spring migration (Alerstam & Hedenström 1998; Madsen 2001; Drent et al. 2003)? Answers to these questions are critical in forecasting the possible impacts of global climate change, over-harvesting of food supplies, habitat destruction and disturbance at stopover sites. Recent studies strongly suggest that survival and successful reproduction are condition dependent (Sandberg & Moore 1996; Marra et al. 1998, Béty et al. 2003) and that long-distance migrants may not be able to adjust their migration schedules to maximize individual fitness in changing environments (Both & Visser 2001; Gill et al. 2001).

Species such as Arctic-breeding shorebirds that winter in the Southern Hemisphere and migrate in spring in a series of long flights between a few highly productive stopover sites have been predicted to be highly susceptible to the above factors (Piersma & Baker 2000). Consistent with this prediction, populations of many species of shorebird around the world have recently been reported to be in serious decline. In a broadly based survey of 35 species of shorebird in Canada, negative trends or statistically significant declines were recorded in 28 (80%), while only...
one showed a positive trend (Donaldson et al. 2000). The US Shorebird Conservation Plan identified aspects of the biology of these birds that make them particularly vulnerable demographically (Brown et al. 2001), including risks associated with long-distance migration, dependency on dispersed and sometimes ephemeral habitats where they concentrate in large flocks, losses of critical refuelling habitats and low reproductive potential (Piersma & Baker 2000; Donaldson et al. 2000).

One of the flagship species among long-distance shorebirds is the red knot (Calidris canutus), especially the nearctic subspecies C. c. rufa. Although a smaller population overwinters in northern Brazil, most birds migrate a prodigious 30 000 km annually between overwintering sites in Tierra del Fuego (TDF) and breeding sites in the Canadian Arctic (Harrington 2001). To achieve this feat they must stop over at a few productive refuelling sites at strategic locations along the flyway, particularly along the northern migration to the breeding grounds. As the red knots move northwards, the timing of departures becomes increasingly synchronized, and at the final stopover site in Delaware Bay in the USA, all birds depart for the breeding grounds within a period of a few days (Myers 1986; Clark et al. 1993). Delaware Bay is a crucial site at which to accumulate nutrients for the final flight to the breeding sites and for survival on the initially food-free tundra and through unpredictable bouts of freezing weather, which can cause high levels of mortality (Boyd 1992). Red knots feed almost exclusively on a superabundant supply of eggs of spawning horseshoe crabs (Limulus polyphemus) (Castro & Myers 1993; Tsipoura & Burger 1999). There are no major refuelling sites en route to the arctic from Delaware Bay where low-mass birds can belatedly gain substantial reserves and thus compensate for late arrival. The approximate doubling of mass from arrival at 90–120 g to departure at 180–220 g is achieved annually if conditions are favourable (Baker et al. 2001). At an average rate of mass increase of 4.6 g day\(^{-1}\), the highest recorded among the world’s subspecies and staging sites (Piersma et al. 2004), the birds need to refuel over a period of ca. 19–22 days to reach maximum mass. This ideally includes an initial rebuilding of organs such as the gut following a migration leg of 5400 km from northern Brazil to Delaware Bay (Battley et al. 2000). Individual red knots can store fat and protein at two to three times the annual average rate (maximum of 15 g day\(^{-1}\); A. J. Baker, P. M. Gonzalez and P. W. Atkinson, unpublished data), probably when horseshoe crab eggs are superabundantly available. Consequently, even migrants arriving late in May should be able to reach large departure masses, thus achieving the nutrient-store levels necessary for migration, survival and maximizing the reproductive potential of the population.

Birds depart Delaware Bay en masse about 28–30 May each year (Baker et al. 2001) and need to have stored 1890 kJ of energy or ca. 47 g of fat to fly the 2400 km to the Arctic breeding areas (based on empirical relationships between body mass and flight costs in Krist et al. (2001)). An additional 6.5 g of fat per day would be used if birds arrived during inhospitable conditions and were unable to feed. Based on an average fat-free mass of 130 g late in the stopover period (Piersma 2002), red knots need to achieve a departure mass of at least 180–200 g just to cover the costs of the flight to the breeding grounds and to survive an initial few days of snow cover.

We report here studies of the annual survival of red knots relative to refuelling rates and dates of arrival in Delaware Bay. Our objective was to detect any potential impact of the order-of-magnitude increase in the take of horseshoe crabs since the mid-1990s as bait for the fishing and conch fisheries (Walls et al. 2002). This huge increase in the harvest of horseshoe crabs has ignited a heated controversy between the fishing industry and conservation agencies concerned with the impact on the long-term demographics of the crabs and the follow-on effect on shorebirds through a diminished supply of eggs for refuelling. This controversy has been fuelled by annual aerial counts of wintering flocks in TDF, which recorded a large decline in the population of red knots from 51 000 to 27 000 between the years 2000 and 2002 (Morrison et al. 2004). A January 2003 aerial survey of sites along the Patagonian coast known to support flocks of wintering knots in the 1980s located only 560 birds, and a December 2003 survey in northern Brazil indicated that this population is small (possibly 5000–7000 birds). Thus, there is no evidence that birds are redistributing themselves elsewhere along the flyway.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

In 1997–2002 we caught large samples of birds in Delaware Bay (n = 9851) with cannon nets, weighed them to assess the fulfilment of energetic requirements of refuelling shorebirds and marked them with numbered metal bands for survival analysis (Niles et al. 2004). In addition, we captured and marked birds (n = 3644) at the other end of the flyway from 1995 to 2003 in Bahía de San Antonio in northern Patagonia and in TDF (Argentina and Chile). All encounter histories are based solely on physical recaptures in nets. Analysis with the program U-CARx v. 1.3 (Choquet et al. 2001) showed that both datasets (table 1) conformed to Cormack-Jolly-Seber (CJS) assumptions. Data were classified into migration years beginning on 1 July each year, so that survival estimates reflect events after the birds leave Delaware Bay each year on their annual migration to return and fatten the following spring. Analyses were run in MARK 3.2 (White & Burnham 1999) using standard CJS models with time intervals set to the corresponding periods between the migration years that we sampled. Both datasets were used to test goodness-of-fit to standard CJS models as well as to the biologically plausible model \( \phi(t_1, t_2) p(t) \), where \( \phi \) is the survival rate, \( p \) is the recapture rate and \( t_1 \) precedes the 2000/2001 population-reduction event in TDF and \( t_2 \) includes it. Model selection was based on the Akaike information criterion (AIC). Because some of the parameter estimates were on the boundary, we used profile likelihood as implemented in MARK to calculate confidence intervals (CIs).

To investigate annual patterns of mass gain in Delaware Bay we calculated percentages of red knots in each of four different mass categories (≥160 g, ≥180 g, ≥190 g and ≥200 g) on 28 May (near departure time). Departure masses were predicted in separate binary logistic regressions of each of the four mass categories (1 = yes, 0 = no) on year (categorical independent variable) and date of initial capture (continuous independent variable) with logit link.

In a separate analysis we computed mean masses and 95% CIs of known survivors in the five years 1997–2001. Owing to
Carasses were stored frozen at –20°C and dissected to organ level, dried to constant mass and the fat stores and organ sizes of females close to departure. Sex ratios were biased heavily towards females in these samples, but previous work at a similar spring stopover area in Iceland showed that there are no differences between the sexes in body composition (Piersma et al. 1999). Arrival times in Delaware Bay of knots banded in TDF and northern Patagonia were estimated by scanning flocks regularly for colour-marked birds throughout May and early June each year from 1997 to 2002. Birds from Rio Grande in Argentine TDF were marked with orange flags and site and year colour bands. Birds marked during migration with orange flags and colour bands in Bahia Lomas in Chilean TDF had red flags as well as site and year colour bands. Birds from Bahia de San Antonio in northern Patagonia and with blue flags and colour bands in southern Brazil were also included because they also winter in TDF.

To investigate whether the fat stores and organ sizes of refuelling birds in Delaware Bay were affected in the critical years before and during the rapid population decline, small numbers of adult red knots were collected randomly from 25 May 1999 (two males, six females) and 25 May 2000 (one male, six females) close to departure. Sex ratios were biased heavily towards females in these samples, but previous work at a similar spring stopover area in Iceland showed that there are no differences between the sexes in body composition (Piersma et al. 1999). Carcasses were stored frozen at –20°C until they were dissected to organ level, dried to constant mass and the fat extracted following procedures outlined in Piersma et al. (1999).

Owing to the annual life cycle of red knots and the recognition of two age classes (because birds first breed in their second year), we used a two-dimensional matrix population model for demographic modelling. The entries or vital rates of this matrix are fecundity, juvenile survival and adult survival. Additionally we have a $2 \times 1$ vector of population size containing the estimates of the total numbers of adults and juveniles. To obtain an estimate of the population size after 1 year, we simply multiply the initial population vector by our matrix model

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  n_1(t + 1) \\
  n_2(t + 1)
\end{pmatrix}
= 
\begin{pmatrix}
  0 & f(t) \\
  \phi_{juv} & \phi_{ad}
\end{pmatrix}
\begin{pmatrix}
  n_1(t) \\
  n_2(t)
\end{pmatrix},
\]

where $n_1(t)$ and $n_2(t)$ are, respectively, the numbers of juveniles and adults in year $t$, $f$ is the yearly fecundity and $\phi_{juv}$ and $\phi_{ad}$ are juvenile and adult survival, respectively. Assuming that the mean fecundity and annual survivals remain constant, we can calculate the population trend in the near future. However, natural or anthropogenic variability in fecundity and unreliability in our survival estimates can cause the true population trend to deviate from our predicted trend. We used bootstrapping to determine the 95% confidence limits of this predicted trend. Unreliability in the population growth rate is the result of unreliability in the estimation of the vital rates, the model parameters. We assumed a uniform distribution for fecundity with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 0.30. For each year, a value for fecundity was selected randomly. Survival probabilities were drawn from a binomial distribution varying from 0 to 1. From this distribution, one value for adult and juvenile survival was selected randomly to cover all 10 successive years. These randomly selected values were the input parameters of the matrix population model.

One major stumbling block is that two essential vital rates needed in the population model, fecundity and first-year survival, are defined using data from studies conducted elsewhere and are not estimated using field data collected for C. r. rufa. However, the number of second-year birds sampled in catches in TDF can be used to derive indirectly an estimate of the population growth rate without knowing the two missing vital rates. We define $\phi_{ad}(t) = s\phi_{ad}(t)$, where $s$ is a factor specifying the relationship between first-year and adult survival, $\phi_{fsad}(t)$ and $\phi_{ad}(t)$, respectively. Assuming that birds first breed in their second year and raise offspring, fecundity is defined as

\[
f(t) = \frac{N_{2nd}(t + 1)}{N_{ad}(t) + N_{2nd}(t)}
\]

$N$ is the total number of individuals in TDF based on count data. In addition, we can define the number of second-year birds $N_{2nd}(t)$ as $N_{2nd}(t + 1) = N_{2nd}(t)\phi_{ad}(t) = N_{2nd}(t)s\phi_{ad}(t)$. Combining these two equations leads to

\[
f(t) = \frac{N_{2nd}(t + 2)}{N_{ad}(t) + N_{2nd}(t)}
\]
mean body masses declined significantly (t-test: \( p < 0.001 \)) from 182.8 ± 22.6 g in 1997 to 162.3 ± 24.5 g in 2002. There has therefore been a significant increase in the proportion of red knots departing Delaware Bay that are under-conditioned for the joint energetic demands of migration to and breeding success in the Arctic.

We investigated whether reduced departure masses affected return rates (a product of true survival, site fidelity and recapture rate) of adults caught in Delaware Bay. Red knots known to survive to a later year, through recaptures or resights throughout the flyway, were heavier at initial capture than birds never seen again (one-way ANOVA: \( F_{1,789} = 13.80, \ p < 0.001 \)). Earlier-arriving birds thus are predicted to have a higher probability of surviving and returning in subsequent years because they have more time to attain higher departure masses. However, even known survivors first captured in the peak stopover period of 15–30 May (\( n = 382 \)) showed strong declines in mean observed mass at 23 May (the covariate mean) and predicted mass at 28 May (near departure) in recent years (figure 1b,c). This indicates that even among known survivors there is considerable among-year heterogeneity in mean rates of nutrient accumulation in the critical five days before departure, especially in 1999 and 2000: 10.4 g d\(^{-1}\) (1997), 5.8 g d\(^{-1}\) (1998), 2.6 g d\(^{-1}\) (1999), 4.6 g d\(^{-1}\) (2000) and 6.4 g d\(^{-1}\) (2001).

In 1997 even birds arriving at 130 g on 22 May would have been able to reach 180 g by 28 May, but in later years there has been an increase in the proportion of poorly conditioned birds at the end of the season. This could be attributable to a combination of birds being unable to put on mass at a sufficient rate and an influx of late-arriving birds in poor condition. Arrival time of the southernmost-wintering birds in relation to the more northerly birds has certainly differed over time, although in most years the former appear to arrive later than the latter in Delaware Bay and in 2000 and 2001 the highest proportion of TDF birds occurred at or after the peak aerial count (figure 2). Thus, late arrival and reduced food availability are implicated in the reduced rate of body-mass gain of known survivors, resulting in an increase in the proportion of birds that are poorly conditioned at the departure date.

As fecundity is a known estimate multiplied by \( s / n \), as first-year survival is a known estimate multiplied by \( s / n \) and as the elasticities of fecundity and first-year survival are similar (G. Aarts, unpublished data), we conclude that \( s / n \) has no effect on the estimated population trajectory.

3. RESULTS

With thresholds in departure body mass of 180–200 g, red knots have shown increasing signs of energetic stress in refuelling since 1999 (figure 1a). From 1997/1998 to 2001/2002 the predicted proportion of well-conditioned knots (200 g or greater) in Delaware Bay near departure time in late May decreased significantly by 70%. The same trend was detected in the most poorly conditioned half of the population on 28 May each year (figure 1a). Within 2–3 days of the peak departure for the Arctic, mean body masses declined significantly (t-test: \( p < 0.001 \)) from 182.8 ± 22.6 g in 1997 to 162.3 ± 24.5 g in 2002.
1997/1998) to 56.4% in the ensuing 3-year period to 2000/2001 (table 2b). The data are not sufficient to estimate $\phi_3$ (annual survival for 2000/2001–2001/2002) accurately, but the parameter is estimable because fixing it at a value of 0.95 causes the deviance to change. Considering the selection of the time-dependent model and the profile likelihood CIs we can only conclude that $\phi_3 \approx \phi_1$. Using a larger mark–recapture dataset for Delaware Bay for 1997/1998–2001/2002 we detected the same large decline in annual survival, and localized it to after the birds left Delaware Bay in 2000 (table 2).

Although productivity in the 2000 breeding season cannot be measured directly because only a small number of juveniles make a full migration to TDF each year, indirect evidence that the 2000 breeding season was a poor one comes from numbers of immature second-year birds in cannon net catches in February 1995, December 2000 and late November 2001. The decline in population size by a further 10 000 since July 2000, and corresponds to the expectations of a minimum of 0.0), then the TDF population (including first-year birds that winter further north) is predicted to be roughly stable at ca. 70 000 birds (figure 4a). However, if the 1997/1998–2000/2001 levels of annual survival prevail, the population is predicted to approach extremely low numbers by 2010 when the probability of extinction will be correspondingly higher than it is today (figure 4b). The aerial census numbers plotted here suggest strongly that the population was on the latter trajectory through 2002.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the capture–recapture data collected in the wintering populations in TDF–Patagonia and from the critically important last refuelling stop in Delaware Bay reveals the dramatic drop in annual survival that occurred between the 1999/2000 (ending 30 June 2000) and the 2000/2001 (beginning 1 July 2000) migration years. The absence of transience in the two datasets (U-test3.SR: $p > 0.1$) argues against temporary emigration as an explanation for the large reduction in annual survival since July 2000, and corresponds to the expectations of a large mortality event implied by the 14 000 lower bird count in TDF in February 2001. This localizes the large mortality to the period after the knots left Delaware Bay and migrated to the Arctic Canadian breeding grounds and the following southern migration and over-wintering period in TDF. The same pattern seems to have occurred in the next migration year, when the aerial count recorded the loss of another 10 000 birds. Cannon net catches in TDF revealed that part of this decrease was attributable to successively lower recruitment of second-year birds in wintering flocks, indicating that breeding success was reduced by refuelling problems in adults in Delaware Bay.
Factors explaining the decline of a shorebird population

Figure 3. Box plots with averages (filled circles) of body mass and the FFDMs of the pectoral muscles, intestine and liver of knots collected in Delaware Bay in late May 1998, 1999 and 2000. There was significant between-year variation in the masses of pectoral muscles (ANOVA: $F_{2,16} = 5.0, p = 0.02$), intestine ($F_{2,16} = 11.8, p = 0.001$) and liver ($F_{2,16} = 4.9, p = 0.02$). Averages that are statistically significantly different from each other (at the 5% confidence level as indicated by Scheffe tests) are connected by horizontal bars.

Table 2. (a) Model selection and (b) real function parameters of the best-fitting models for the TDF–northern Patagonia and Delaware Bay datasets with sin link function.


(a) model

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<th>Parameter</th>
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<th>AICc weight</th>
<th>model likelihood</th>
<th>number of parameters</th>
<th>deviance</th>
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(b) parameter

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<td>0.846 0.529 1.000</td>
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* CIs for these $\phi$ estimates were calculated with profile likelihood (Lebreton et al. 1992).
Thus, we have demonstrated that there are striking fitness consequences for both adult survival and the number of second-year birds in wintering populations of red knots that are correlated with the amount of nutrient stores accumulated in Delaware Bay, the last stopover site before they migrate to breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic. However, our analysis does not permit separation of reductions in breeding success from declines in juvenile survival as the cause of decreased recruitment, though both might have occurred. Lower survival of juveniles might imply further problems during the southern migration and/or at wintering sites. Adult survival rates are way below those recorded in any other population of red knot (e.g. C. c. islandica in the UK: estimates over intervals of ca. 10 years varying from 76.4% to 85.8%; Boyd & Piersma 2001). The amount of food available and the timing of arrival at this last site directly affect the departure masses the birds can achieve. Furthermore, during fuel storage in 1999 and 2000 some critical organs were reduced in size compared with 1998 and smaller than expected on the basis of data collected from other stopover sites. The reduced pectoral muscles in late May 1999 relative to the expected size (Piersma et al. 1999) could have compromised flight. The lining of the intestine and the mucosa it produces protect the body against pathogens ingested with the food (Schat & Myers 1991). Reductions in intestinal mass (33% lower in 1999) have been experimentally shown to suppress immune function (Sanderson 2001). The liver plays a prominent part in the detoxification process, so that a reduction in size by a third as in 1999 and 2000 could easily compromise long-term health.

The decline in the average departure masses of red knots follows the dramatic increase in commercial fishing that began in 1990 and peaked in 1995/1996 to provide bait for eel and conch fisheries (Walls et al. 2002), and also reflected a sixfold decline in the numbers of horseshoe crabs caught in survey trawls in Delaware Bay by the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife (S. Michels, unpublished data, cited in Andres (2003)). We contend that the over-harvesting of horseshoe crabs in the past and the erosion of beaches in Delaware Bay have jointly reduced the number of quality foraging areas for shorebirds, and has concentrated the birds into a few key locales where crab eggs are locally abundant. There is strong evidence that the increasing dependence of birds on so few vulnerable areas and the increasing proportion of poor-conditioned birds at departure time have direct and serious implications for the continuing viability of the rufa subspecies.

The annual February aerial census in TDF reported that the overwintering population had stabilized at ca. 30 000 red knots in 2003 (Morrison et al. 2004). However, the peak weekly aerial count in Delaware Bay in May 2003 declined to 16 000 birds from 31 000 the previous year, following a very late spring migration in and very restricted spawning of horseshoe crabs in 2003. The late arrival and reduced supplies of crab eggs are expected to have even more severe fitness-reducing effects on red knots through decreased breeding success, recruitment and annual survival than we have reported here.

The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Royal Ontario Museum Foundation and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (A.J.B.), the Wildlife Conservation Society and the New Jersey Endangered Native Species Program (T.P.), a PIONIER-grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (T.P.), and Centro de Pesquisas para Conservação das Aves Silvestres (CEMAVE, Brazil). They specially thank N. Garfield and B. Archer for supporting their work in South America, and Birders Exchange for donations of binoculars and telescopes. They also thank the Museo Vir- gina Choquinter and Conc. Deliberante de Rio Grande, SSsec. Rec. Naturales and Gob. de TDF, CODEMA Rio Negro, Prefectura Naval Argentina, Flia. Baraschi, Flia. Canga and Flia. Amena for making their work possible and for providing accommodation and logistical support in Argentina. M. Schaub provided invaluable assistance with analysis of the capture–recapture data, J. van der Meer gave additional statistical advice, R. Visser of the University of Groningen prepared the final figures, and K. Clark provided the aerial census data in Delaware Bay. The authors owe a debt of gratitude to the legions of volunteers, especially H. Sitters, V. D’Amico, G. Murga, M. Abril, L. Benegas, R. Matus, O. Blank and G. Guerrero, who made it possible to catch, process and resight large samples of knots throughout the flyway.
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As this paper exceeds the maximum length normally permitted, the authors have agreed to contribute to production costs.