

Wader Swamp Shooting In The Caribbean

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Rick and Elis Simpson



Decoys and Grey Plovers on Barbados © Reginald Senior



SUPPORTING SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION
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In 1963 an unprecedented, and never repeated, estimated 46,000 waders or shorebirds were shot in Barbados by the shorebird hunting clubs. Among them was the very last verifiable record of the Eskimo Curlew.



One Greater and two Lesser Yellowlegs © Elis Simpson

Most of the migratory shorebird species breeding in eastern North America and the Arctic pass over the Caribbean region during late August, September. As they do they may encounter severe tropical storms and use the islands as refuges. Hunting clubs in the region take advantage of these falls of birds, often concentrated in small areas of mangroves *etc.* to shoot large numbers of them. In 2009 seventeen Hudsonian Whimbrels were satellite tagged in the US. They were followed on their migration south through the Caribbean to their wintering area in São Luis, Brazil and then back to their breeding grounds



Hudsonian Whimbrel © Elis Simpson

in Canada. Two of these tagged Whimbrels were named Machi and Goshen. They were travelling separately when they were caught up in different storms. Goshen flew through the east side of Hurricane Irene, and ended up in Guadeloupe via Montserrat and Antigua. Machi on the other hand flew through Tropical Storm Maria and landed on Montserrat before flying on to Guadeloupe. Both set down in Guadeloupe on the 12th of September 2011 and, within hours, both had been shot.

Their deaths in this manner highlighted the plight of waders that are unlucky enough to pass through the Caribbean, and a public outcry followed.

Much needed changes have come from the hunting community itself as well as the government on Guadeloupe since then, thanks to international efforts from conservation bodies. These changes will help to protect migratory wader species ensuring that the 'harvest' is sustainable. However, on Martinique, such efforts have not been so successful and indeed the plan there is to increase the size of the bag even further, with some species having no limits.

Martinique is just 1,128km², with more than 2,000 hunters. It is an overseas *département* of France, and therefore part of the French Republic, making it a special territory of the European Union. The island is also an outermost region (OMR) of the European Union, however it is not covered by European Birds and Habitats Directives.

In Martinique the hunting season is prolonged (from 25th July – 15th February) and hunting is allowed every day. There are bag limits set but these are set to be increased to unsustainable levels. The daily limits are:

- 2 Whimbrel (max 10/year)
- 2 Hudsonian Godwits (max 10/year)
- 12 Black-bellied Plovers (max 50/year)
- 12 American Golden Plovers (max 50/year)
- 15 Short-billed Dowitchers (no limit/year)
- 20 Lesser Yellowlegs (no limit/year)
- and NO LIMIT for Ruddy Turnstones, Greater Yellowlegs, Wilson's Snipes, Upland Sandpipers, Willets, Stilt Sandpipers, and Pectoral Sandpipers.

In 2016/17 a tri-national agreement in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Department of Environment and Climate Change Canada, The *Office National de la Chasse et de la Faune Sauvage* of the French Republic and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USA) that related to the conservation of shorebirds in the Western Atlantic Flyway.

The purpose of the MOU is to set out provisions for information sharing and collaboration between the three agencies in order to promote sustainable populations of shorebirds in the Western Atlantic



Pectoral Sandpiper © Elis Simpson



Willet © Elis Simpson

Flyway. Specifically, they intend to:

- Share information about wader ecology.
- Share information about wader habitat protection and management.
- Collaborate on scientific surveys and wade monitoring programs, and harvest assessment methods.
- Provide cooperative support for data analysis and reporting.
- keep each other informed about changes in wader hunting regulations in their respective countries.



Woodbourne Shorebird Refuge© Reginald Senior

Barbados too was a hotspot for wader shooting, but there too things have changed for the better. Much of the change has been occasioned by a drift in attitude away from hunting, younger people are not so keen on the 'sport' and even those who have practised it for years are, in many cases, now lending their skills to helping conserve waders rather than shoot them. One of the former shooting swamps Woodbourne Shorebird Refuge, is now maintained as a shooting free refuge.

The shooting season in Barbados is much shorter than in Martinique from the 15th of July to the 15th of October. In the past up to 24 different shorebird shooting swamps had been created and managed simply to attract waders to be shot. At its peak there were 20 swamps in use in any given year. This number has diminished and in 2019, members of five shooting swamps shot about 9,000 shorebirds; the current allowable limit is 22,500.

The shooters use various tactics to attract the birds to within range. They use decoys that are set up in the water which give the impression to passing birds that it is safe to rest there, as in the cover picture. They use hand crafted whistles to imitate the birds to bring them in and probably the most upsetting is the use of live birds that had been wounded but not killed on previous years, as well as some uninjured birds, kept in cages to lure their kind down to face the guns.



Captive waders in Barbados © Reginald Senior



Hudsonian Godwit © Elis Simpson

On a positive note, it has been shown that these shooting swamps, while they are maintained for shooting are overall a benefit to wildlife and when they fall into disrepair due to abandonment, their ecological value dissipates.

Whilst it is easy to get upset and emotional about this harvesting of waders, it is clear that confrontation is not the way forward. In the case of the shooter that killed the Hudsonian Whimbrel Machi and returned its satellite tag to the researchers, according to those researchers when he was told of Machi's history and the distances she had travelled he was amazed. As is often the case, not just with hunters but with birders too sometimes, he had

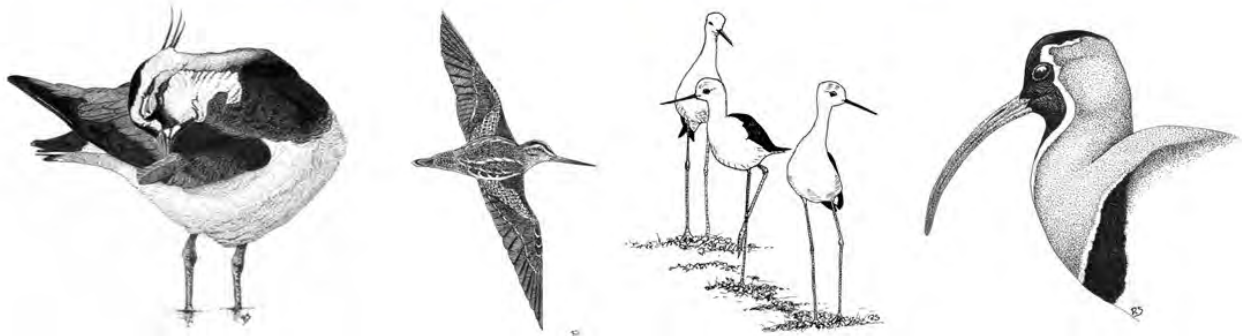
only really considered the birds in respect of his own experience, on the island of Guadeloupe. He had no idea what these birds are capable of. One of the researchers made the very illuminating point that flocks of birds can blur into anonymity, but knowing the name and history of a single individual can somehow sharpen the focus and open a whole new understanding of the bird's lifestyle and the incredible challenges it has faced and overcome. Not knowing the bigger picture, a shooter will see large numbers of birds arriving and not detect any population-threatening declines, however, if that same shooter is provided with the full facts, he will be able to appreciate that the only way forward, to protect both the bird populations and therefore his chosen 'sport', moderation and the conservation of the birds concerned is essential. This is what has happened in Barbados and Guadeloupe and, it is hoped, this will also be the case in Martinique. What is interesting, and gives cause for optimism, is that the allowable bag in Martinique is probably not reached. The potential is still there though, so it is hoped that the shooters themselves will see that a reduction in the bag limit will allow them to continue to hunt, but will remove the danger of over 'harvesting' when a massive fall of birds occurs as it did in 1963. It is to be hoped that with this renewed vision and attitude, the situation where the last individual of any given wader species is shot in the Caribbean, is never repeated.



Ruddy Turnstones © Elis Simpson

New Wader Quest book - *A Quest for Waders* by Rick and Elis Simpson

A new book from Wader Quest Publishing by Rick and Elis Simpson. This book chronicles the journeys they made to see waders around the world, and the parallel journey of Wader Quest from fundraiser to Registered Charity - all proceeds go to Wader Quest.



Foreword by Dominic Couzens

'This is a cracking read whether you're a waderphile or not. Ticking, dipping, ducking, diving, it's all here as Rick and Elis go through their version of a mid-life crisis to set up Wader Quest. A must-read for all birders.'

- Iolo Williams: Naturalist and T. V. presenter.

'Rick and Elis' enthusiasm nipples through this book. what they have achieved, bringing waders to the forefront of peoples minds alongside their conservation is second to none. A brilliant read which, like their beloved waders, will have you probing deeper into this amazing family.'

- Tim Appleton MBE: Founder of Birdfair Rutland Water and Creator of Rutland Water Nature Reserve.

'I was hooked by the prologue. The tragedy of extinction was brought home to me on seeing, in Morocco in 1990, three of the last few slender-billed curlews to exist. Thanks to the commitment of conservation organisations from around the world and support of people like Rick and Elis the spoon-billed sandpiper has a fighting chance of making it.'

- Debbie Pain: Conservationist and scientist.

'Waders are one of the most threatened groups of birds, with several species on the brink of extinction and many more suffering serious declines. This makes Rick and Elis Simpson's Wader Quest - a charity dedicated to protecting waders and highlighting their plight - important and necessary. This fascinating book tells the story of how the organisation grew from their quest to see all the world's waders, before it was too late.'

- Rebecca Armstrong: Editor of Birdwatch magazine.

orders - sales@waderquest.net



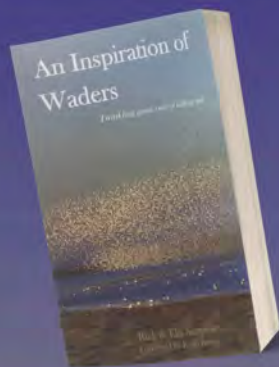
'Breathtakingly excellent - like a birding Michael Palin. The photographs and drawings are fantastic, and the text is fast-moving, endlessly entertaining and amusing.' - Jim Wright.

'This book is all of the things that the reviews on the back cover [above], and the excellent Foreword by Dominic Couzens, promise.' - Mike and Rose Clear.

An Inspiration of Waders

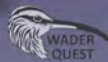
A Wader Quest Publishing book
by Rick and Elis Simpson

An Inspiration of Waders



Twinkling gems over a falling tide

The foreword is by Keith Betton



Discover our cultural connection to
waders and how they have inspired us.



BY RICK AND ELIS SIMPSON



Find out how waders have inspired careers,
myths, legends, art, music, poetry, theatre, books,
discovery and much more besides.



WADER QUEST PUBLISHING

All profits will go to Wader Quest