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Agency Proposes Critical Habitat for Threatened Rufa Red Knot Shorebird

Economists and biologists anticipate few changes to approach in reviewing federal actions along U.S. Atlantic, Gulf coasts

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today a proposed rule to designate 649,066 acres of critical habitat across 13 states for the rufa red knot, a robin-sized shorebird that relies on U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts to fuel its remarkable migrations from the Canadian Arctic to the southern tip of South America. If finalized, the designation would not require federal agencies to expand their current approach in reviewing federal actions such as those involving recreation, development or other activities in rufa red knot habitat.

“Federal agencies have consulted with Service biologists to address conservation of the rufa red knot in hundreds of activities and projects since the bird was listed as threatened in 2015,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Director Wendi Weber. “We’ve determined that these existing recommendations for modifying projects to benefit the rufa red knot would also meet the needs of critical habitat, if designated.”

The Service’s proposed rule focuses conservation in the areas along the coasts with the most rufa red knot activity. Although the birds are also known to migrate over land, no inland stopovers are included.

The proposal includes areas of Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. About 40 percent of the acres overlap with existing critical habitat for piping plover, loggerhead sea turtle, West Indian manatee, Gulf sturgeon and aboriginal prickly-apple.

The ranges of 17 additional threatened and endangered species also overlap with the proposed critical habitat. Much of the proposed acreage is already included within the [Coastal Barrier Resource System](#) (where most new federal expenditures are prohibited) and is nearly evenly distributed among federal, state and private landowners. The proposed critical habitat designation would not affect land ownership, set aside lands or establish a park or wildlife refuge.

Critical habitat designations encourage the incorporation of species’ conservation into habitat management. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat consult with the Service to ensure their actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

A draft economic analysis found that the existing threatened status of the rufa red knot provides substantial baseline protection for the species. Since the species was listed in 2015, the Service has consulted on more than 1,400 activities and projects in rufa red knot habitat. Primarily shoreline stabilization, habitat restoration and coastal development activities.

The Service anticipates that typical conservation measures already being recommended during consultations would remain the same. Thus, the designation is not anticipated to add more than a slight administrative workload to document the proposed critical habitat.

Maintaining natural stretches of beaches and other coastal habitats is extremely important for shorebirds and other wildlife that depend upon them, including red knots. Intact coastal systems and nature-based infrastructure are also more resilient to climate change and help protect nearby communities.

While migrating and wintering in the U.S., rufa red knots look for safe, undisturbed areas along bays, inlets and the ocean that they can use for resting and feeding. Natural material that washes onto the beach, known as wrack, and intertidal areas provide abundant food resources for fueling up before long journeys. Large open areas allow the birds to watch for predators and other threats.

Ongoing conservation work has slowed the steep declines in rufa red knot populations, but the shorebird's numbers have not recovered. Threats to the rufa red knot are symptomatic of complex climate-related challenges faced by most coastal wildlife and communities. Beaches and marshes continue to be modified or lost to sea-level rise, shoreline stabilization and development.

Climate change affects the availability of food for rufa red knots, the timing of their annual migrations and their rapidly warming breeding habitat in the Arctic. Human activity in many coastal areas disturbs the birds and disrupts their feeding and resting behaviors.

The Service will continue to work with federal, state, local agencies and non-governmental organizations on projects to protect sensitive coastal habitat to benefit the rufa red knot and coastal communities impacted by sea level rise and storm surge.

The proposed rule will publish in the *Federal Register* on Thursday, July 15, 2021 and will be available for public comment at [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov) under docket number FWS–R5–ES–2021–0032. The Service requests comments or information from other governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties concerning this proposed rule. Comments must be received within 60 days, on or before Monday, September 13, 2021.

Additionally, the Service will hold a virtual public meeting and hearing via Zoom and teleconference on Wednesday, August 18, 2021 from 6:00pm to 9:00pm, Eastern time. Registration is required in advance. Additional information can be found here:

<https://fws.gov/northeast/red-knot/>.

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