Hunting of migratory shorebirds along the Atlantic Americas Flyway: an overlooked source of bushmeat

Brad A. Andres

Shorebirds migrating from North America to the Neotropics face a number of threats, including widespread hunting in the Caribbean and South America. This article summarizes the worrying scale and characteristics of this hunting, plus the varied solutions that conservationists are pursuing in different locations across the region.

Origins and persistence

The modern practice of hunting migratory shorebirds (waders) in the Americas can trace its origins to post-Columbian European colonization and has persisted for more than half a millennium. Hunting and, interchangeably, harvesting is defined as the intentional wounding or killing of birds, in this case migratory shorebirds from North America, by use of firearms, nets, traps, or other methods. Because of the historical context of changing colonial rule and subsequent independence, the large number of independent states, dependencies and areas of special sovereignty (hereafter 'jurisdictions') within the Americas has led to a widely varying set of policies related to migratory shorebird hunting. Current laws and regulations on migratory shorebird hunting range from full protection (no allowable killing) to partial protection (limited seasons and bag limits) to no protection (unlimited hunting with no seasons or bag limits).

1 A hunting bag photographed in Guadeloupe, October 2013 (Anthony Levesque/AMAZONA). Species killed include Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*, Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda* and Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*.

In the Americas, harvesting of migratory shorebirds is allowed by 17 jurisdictional governments, is not permitted by 37 and is not addressed in legislation by three (Watts & Turrin 2016). Of the 17 jurisdictions that allow migratory shorebird hunting, 15 lie within the Atlantic Americas Flyway (which connects the Canadian Arctic Archipelago with the southern tip of Tierra del Fuego: see tinyurl.com/Atlantic-Americas-Flyway), and 12 of these 15 are in the Caribbean or northern South America.

Although hunting has faded out or been closed in many jurisdictions in this latter region (e.g., British Virgin Islands), recent reviews indicate that substantial harvesting of migratory shorebirds still occurs in Barbados, northern Brazil, France's Overseas Departments and Territories (French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Saint Martin), Guyana and Suriname (AFSI Harvest Working Group 2020). Some level of shorebird hunting also occurs in Grenada, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Trinidad and Tobago; a ban on all waterbird hunting was enacted in Trinidad and Tobago in 2019.

Because of the persistence of migratory shorebird hunting and the potential effect on shorebird population declines, a Shorebird Harvest Working Group was established in 2011 during the development of the Atlantic Flyway Shorebird Initiative (see atlanticflywayshorebirds.org) to assess the extent of shorebird hunting within the flyway. Herein, I present a general overview of the current state of migratory-shorebird hunting in the Caribbean and northern South America, which is largely based on the efforts of the working group.

Bajan shooting swamps

As the colonial human population in **Barbados** grew, removal of native vegetation for agricultural production, particularly sugar cane, opened up the landscape and created emergency stopover habitat for shorebirds migrating over the ocean from eastern North America. Only a few natural wetlands existed on the island, and plantation owners across the centuries created wetlands, known as shooting swamps, to harvest shorebirds and other waterbirds. Development and operation of created wetlands on Barbados eventually rivaled public and private wetland reserves in the UK. Hunters also pursued upland 'grasspipers', such as American Golden-Plover *Pluvialis dominica* and Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda*, in pastures, fallow fields or grassy barrens.

Natural history observers described the role tropical storms played in grounding migrant shorebirds and how resident hunters took advantage of such weather events. For example, Feilden (1889) commented: "A shift of wind from the north-east, with squally weather to the south-east, is ardently longed for by the Barbados sportsmen towards the end of August, as this forces the migratory hosts to alight instead of passing over at a great height, as they are seen to do when the wind is from the north-east."

Rather than just wait for these unpredictable weather events, 5–10 swamp shooters set out decoys, used an elaborate series of whistles (and later audio recordings) and kept wounded individual birds in cages to entice passing shorebirds. Huts erected at shooting swamps also served as social centres, and rivalries arose among swamps. As Jackman (1901) described: "You are shooting at strangers, at birds of passage, who will immediately resume their journey towards other lands the moment you scare them with your shots. You want as many as possible for your two barrels, and, besides, the rivalry between the different stands demands that you should score more than your neighbours if at all possible."

The heyday of shooting in Barbados occurred during the late 19th and most of the 20th centuries. As many as 61 individual properties on the island were managed for hunting shorebirds, although only 20–25 swamps were active in any given year (W. Burke pers. comm.). By the 1990s, only 10 shooting swamps were still active, and today only half that number actively shoot shorebirds.

Using daily scorebooks of shooting swamps, Hutt (1991) estimated an annual harvest of <10,000 shorebirds during the 1900s prior to 1960, with an increase to 15,000–20,000 in the 1960s and 1970s; in the latter period, harvest may have exceeded 45,000 individuals in some years. The last known specimen of the Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, categorized as Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct), was shot by a hunter in Barbados in 1963. A more recent analysis by Canadian Wildlife Service biologists of scorebook data from 10 active shooting swamps during 1988–1992 and 2001–2010, in cooperation with the Barbados Wildfowlers Association, indicated an annual harvest of 12,200–34,570 shorebirds (Wege *et al.* 2014). Today, annual harvest likely ranges from 9,000–15,000 shorebirds during a season that extends from 15 July to 15 October.

In Barbados, and indeed across the region covered by this article (the Caribbean and northern South America), virtually all harvested shorebirds are consumed — in a variety of ways, such as being made into pâté, grilled whole, or chopped up, bones included, and served with