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Hope flies 18,000 miles back to St. Croix

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Hope the whimbrel wades in Great Pond on St. Croix.

Hope the whimbrel has returned to St. Croix's Great Pond mud flats and continues to give the scientists studying her information that was never before known about her species.

"She's certainly a trooper," Nature Conservancy Chief Conservation Scientists Barry Tuit said. "We're assuming she's going to stay the winter there like she did last year, but you never know."

Hope was one of seven whimbrels tagged in 2008 and 2009 as part of a joint project between the Nature Conservancy and the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William & Mary in Virginia.

Whimbrels are small, brown, speckled shorebirds with a long, thin, curved beak the same shape as a fiddler crab tunnel. The crabs are one of the main sources of food for the whimbrels. The birds find wetland areas to feed — called staging grounds — in between very long migratory flights.

Hope was originally captured in May 2009 on Virginia's Delmarva Peninsula and fitted with a 9.5-gram satellite transmitter. Hope left Virginia and flew up to the Arctic Circle to breed. She left from Southampton Island in Hudson's Bay in northern Canada and flew for four days straight, covering 3,500 miles, before stopping on St. Croix on Aug. 14, 2009.

Since she was tagged, she has been tracked twice to breeding grounds along the Mackenzie River near Alaska and has returned three times to the same creek along the Delmarva Peninsula to stage for extended periods during migration.

In total, she has traveled more than 18,000 miles — about three quarters the circumference of the earth — in little more than one year, Tuit said.

Hope is the star of the joint research project because she has survived the longest; therefore, scientists have more data from her than from any of the other tracked birds. Tuit said most of the other birds were lost to predators or storms, or their transmitters simply stopped working.

"Hope still transmitting, and she's really shown us a lot about whimbrel migrations," Tuit said.

"It's amazing they come back to the same mud flat," he said. "It's amazing that their migration depends on specific sites where there's enough food for them to feed on."

"These birds know where they are on the Earth at any given time," Tuit said.

According to a news release from the Center for Conservation Biology, the focus of the project is to collect information that will be useful to long-term conservation efforts.

Satellite tracking represents only one aspect of a broader investigation of whimbrel migration, according to the center's release. In addition to the bird tracking, researchers conducted aerial surveys to estimate seasonal numbers, collected feather samples to locate summer and winter areas through stable-isotope analysis, and initiated a whimbrel watch program.

"Hope has revealed a tremendous amount of information on the ecology of this declining shorebird, including migratory flight speed, migratory routes, the location of critical staging areas, and the linkages between breeding and wintering sites," the release states.

St. Croix resident and bird monitor Lisa Yntema observed Hope last summer when she first arrived at the Great Pond wetlands and was thrilled that the bird returned. When she saw Hope had returned to St. Croix on Aug. 26 — Yntema had been following Hope's satellite tracking map online — she went out to the mud flats.

She said she saw Hope on Aug. 27, and then went back out after Hurricane Earl to make sure the bird survived.

"She looks great," Yntema said. "She was preening and chasing another bird, just as she should be."

Great Pond has been designated an "Important Bird Area" by BirdLife International and is home to more than 75 species of birds as well as fish, crabs and other animals. It is also the site of the endangered least tern's

Hope flies 18,000 miles back to St. Cr... breeding ground.

Yntema said more than 1,000 shorebirds landed there after Hurricane Earl passed. "It's one of our most important wetlands, and it's not being protected," she said.

The wetlands are separated from the Great Pond Bay by a beach berm, Yntema said. Construction going on in the Great Pond area for Golden Resorts — a resort and casino which is planned for the area — necessitated a fence that makes beach access difficult. Rather than walk the mile or so to the beach, some people have been driving on the mud flats, which damages the fragile ecosystem and disturbs the birds' habitat. Yntema said she wants residents to have beach access and is working with local officials to find a solution to the problem.

Hope is 14 ounces, 17½ inches from the tip of her bill to her tail and has a 32-inch wingspan. A bright green tag on her leg identifies her.

Track Hope's journey online at www.ccb-wm.org/programs/migration/Whimbrel.

— Contact reporter Aldeth Lewin at 774-8772 ext. 311 or e-mail alewin@dailynews.vi.

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