



Barry Truitt, chief conservation scientist for The Nature Conservancy's Virginia Coast Reserve, on the Atlantic side of the Eastern Shore.

# Call of the Wild

The Virginia Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, now 50 years old, is a front-line group that works to protect natural resources and wildlife habitat by buying land and managing its 60 preserves. Whether tagging migratory birds or improving water quality in the Clinch Valley, TNC takes the long view. By RICHARD ERNSBERGER JR.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK ATKINSON

**On a sparkling** August morning on the Atlantic side of the Eastern Shore, at an end-of-road spot called Box Hill in Machipongo, Virginia, research biologists Libby Mojica and Fletcher Smith, along with colleague Bart Paxton, are doing the hard work that is conservation. The three are from the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William & Mary, and on this day—working in tandem with Barry Truitt of The Nature Conservancy—they have spent more than an hour deploying three rocket-fired bird-netting traps on marsh mudflats alongside a creek where shorebirds like to gather as the tide comes in. The researchers haul the traps to separate spots in the marsh by boat, cover each with grass and then, sloshing through water and mud, run wire for each about 250 yards to firing pins hung from stakes.

Their target is the whimbrel, a highly migratory shorebird that spends the spring and, for some, part of the summer, on the Eastern Shore, fattening up on fiddler crabs before setting off on a long, nonstop journey to its breeding grounds in the Hudson Bay or Northwest Territories of Canada. Later, the whimbrel—distinctively brown, with a downward curving beak that's ideal for plucking crabs out of burrows—will head south to its prime wintering habitat at the mouth of the Amazon River in northeastern Brazil. These are birds that fly massive distances—hundreds of thousands of miles—every year.

However, recent surveys on the Eastern Shore indicate that the whimbrel population has fallen since the mid-1990s, perhaps by as much as *half*. Experts don't know why, though one theory is that climate change in the Arctic has

altered their food supply. The CCB researchers have been catching and tagging whimbrels, attaching tiny, solar-powered transmitters to their backs, to monitor their migration patterns. Catching any bird is not easy, but on this day, unlike the day before when a prematurely strong high tide scuttled the effort, the team gets lucky.

Peering through a scope, Truitt, chief conservation scientist for TNC and the Virginia Coast Reserve, spots three whimbrels preening on a mudflat directly in front of one of the traps. Using a radio, he alerts the CCB researchers. Mojica hurries over to a firing pin, while Fletcher moves to a position where he can see the birds with binoculars. Confirming that the birds are in a favorable spot, he tells Mojica, via radio, to get ready: "Three, two, one, now!" Boom! Three projectiles hurl the net forward, nabbing two of the whimbrels. Moments later Paxton is on his knees in the muck, untangling the birds from the netting. The birds are then taken to a van on shore where Mojica and Fletcher weigh and measure them. One of the birds, weighing about a pound, is deemed stout enough to receive a \$3,500 satellite tag. He is named Goshen, after a big neck of land nearby, and then released with his buddy—whereupon the two birds flap away

