



Best-selling novelist **Mary Alice Monroe** on shorebirds, story telling, and her new book, *Beach House for Rent* ☐ ☐

My Lowcountry home is the Isle of Palms. The wildlife and landscape here inspire my writing life. Loggerhead sea turtles, bottlenose dolphins, birds of prey, and monarch butterflies have inspired a number of novels.

This time, for my new novel, *Beach House for Rent*, the source of inspiration came from the seabirds and shorebirds we all enjoy seeing at the beach. Squadrons of pelicans flying in formation above the dunes and tiny, adorable peeps skittering along the water's edge in search of food are common sights. But what beachgoers don't notice is the startling fact, according to the Audubon Society, that 70 percent of shorebird populations in the U.S. are in decline. Frankly, that's shocking.

Â

Sandpipers, black skimmers, willets, and plovers are just some of the many



migrating shorebird species that rely on Lowcountry beaches, like the Isle of Palms, for survival. Some like the intrepid red knot, which travels farther than any beach visitor (bird or human) - all the way from the Arctic - have experienced a drastic drop in population.

With these shorebirds as the backdrop of my new novel, I'm able to show readers the beauty and the fragility of these species through the power of story. In *Beach House for Rent*, two women - strangers from different generations - suddenly find themselves under the same roof, seeking solace and strength from a special little beach house for the entire summer. The women find common bonds and try to help each other deal with tragedy, so that at summer's end they, like the migrating shorebirds that come to the island every summer, too, can take flight.

As a novelist, my first responsibility is to craft a compelling storyline with strong characters, a captivating plot, and vivid descriptions to bring the reader into my story world. That's first priority for me. But, when a reader finishes reading the final page of my book, I hope the person is both satisfied with the story and intrigued by what she or he has also learned. That is important to me. I've heard from so many readers over the years who have said my novels opened their eyes and their hearts to the wild around them. And when I can do that - spark that interest at a personal level - then they care. That's when readers move on to learn more, volunteer, and donate time and money to help.



When we are overwhelmed by hearing about so many threats facing our environment, it is easy to feel helpless and discouraged. I know I do at times. But then I remember what my father used to tell me as a child: *Just light one candle to make a difference*. Wise words. Each one of us can make a difference in our own backyard. We can be a light that shines locally.

Whether you live at the beach, like I do, or visit the sandy shores nearest you, there are simple things you and I can do every time we visit the beach that will help the shorebirds - and all coastal wildlife.

- Stay off sand dunes. It's a nesting ground for some shorebirds. When the birds feel threatened, they fly up, exposing their eggs to the relentless sun and burning their own limited energy.
- Keep your dogs on leashes when you see a group of birds clustered along the shore.
- Teach your children not to chase shorebirds. These birds are feeding along the shore to nourish themselves before continuing on their migration.
- Always retrieve your fishing lines. They're deadly to birds and dolphins.
- Fill in your sand holes before you leave. Sea turtles can get trapped in them.
- Avoid using plastic bags, straws, and plastic bottles. It's dangerous to all marine life.
- Pick up your trash. Leave only your footprints in the sand.

Imagine the difference we can make if we all remember to follow these simple actions today and encourage others to do the same! Together we can preserve our beloved Lowcountry beaches,

so that our children and our grandchildren can enjoy the wild beauty for generations to come.

New York Times bestselling author Mary Alice Monroe is a 2018 inductee of the South Carolina Academy of Authors Literary Hall of Fame. **She will be the guest speaker at a USCB Lunch with Author Event on Thursday, June 22 at Hampton Hall in Bluffton**

. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit

www.uscbcenterforthearts.com

Learn more about her new Beach House for Rent at www.maryalicemonroe.com.