

Book shares story of Hope the whimbrel

By ALDETH LEWIN
Daily News Staff

ST. THOMAS — The story of Hope the whimbrel, the small brown bird who travels amazing distances and spends her winters on St. Croix, has been made into a children's book.

Award-winning author and St. John resident Cristina Kessler was contacted by first lady Cecile deJongh's office to write a book to give away to the territory's children during her annual Christmas party.

Kessler was allowed to write what ever she chose, and she knew right away that she would tell Hope's story.

"I think it's a great story of science with a heart," she said. "I found it very inspiring and I thought maybe kids would too."

A whimbrel is a small, brown, speckled shorebird that flies thousands of miles at a single stretch. The birds find wetland areas to feed — called staging grounds — in between very long migratory flights.

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. She is the only one of her group that is still alive and — until last year — was transmitting data.

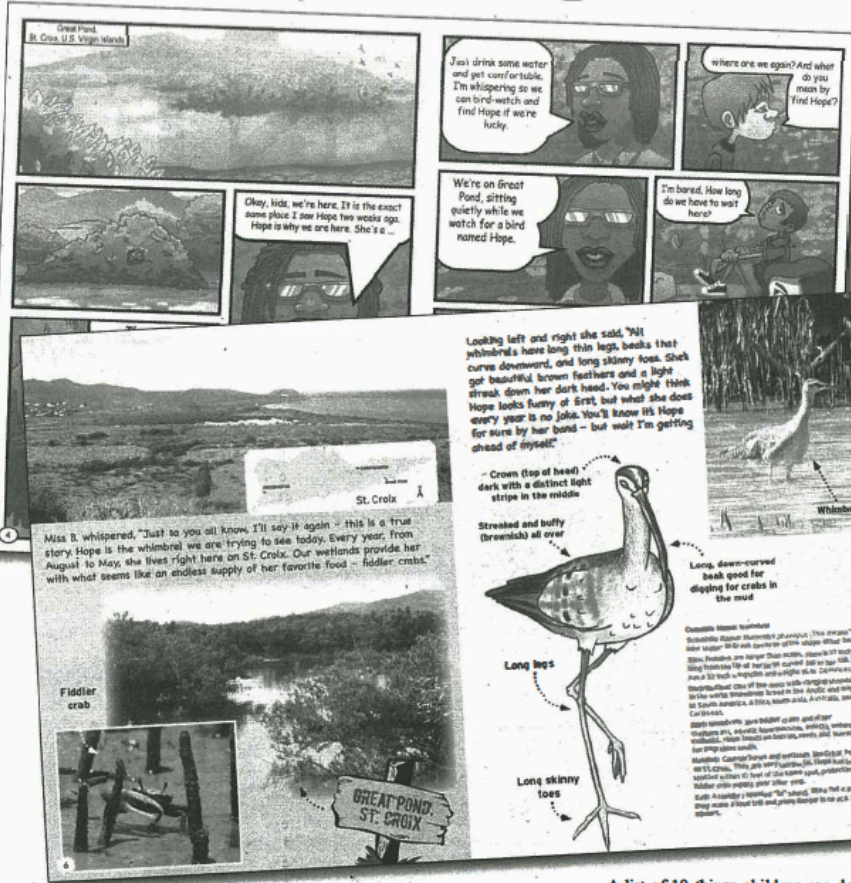
Kessler said the book is like a graphic novel that uses photographs, maps and illustration in unique ways to tell the story of Hope. It is illustrated by Marcos Castillo, a young Virgin Islander from St. Croix.

"I'm very proud and excited about it," Kessler said.

Kessler uses a fictional story of a teacher taking her students to Great Pond on St. Croix to look for Hope to tell the story of the bird and her incredible travels.

The initial printing is a special edition just for the Virgin Islands. It is a 32-page, hardcover, full color book that the first lady will give to kids in kindergarten through third grades in December.

It is funded by corporate and private donations. Anyone interested in donating can send a contribution to the Community Foundation of the Virgin



Islands. The foundation is a nonprofit and the donation is tax deductible. Donations can be made through the CFVI website — www.cfvi.net — as well.

With any donation of \$150 or more the donor will receive a copy of "Hope Is Here!" signed by the author.

With a donation of \$250 or more, the donor will get three copies of the book, one personally autographed to the donor, and two other copies

signed by the author. For donations of \$750 or more the donor will get the three signed books as well as a photograph of Hope the whimbrel suitable for framing.

The trade version of the book is also being published at the same time.

"I'm really hoping that we create a whole flock of birdwatchers from this book," Kessler said. In the back of the book, several teaching tools are included.

A list of 10 things children can do for the environment is designed to help youngsters connect to their surroundings.

"I'm really hoping to get kids involved in the beauty of the environment around them," Kessler said.

The book also has a readers guide for parents and teachers with discussion topics and activities.

Hope and the other whimbrels tagged stunned scientists with their amazing migratory patterns. On one of her first flights tracked by

scientists, Hope flew for four days straight, covering 3,500 miles, from the Arctic Circle to St. Croix.

At first, researchers were not sure if St. Croix was just a pit stop, or the final destination. Hope stayed for the whole winter, eating her fill of fiddler crabs and insects at Great Pond.

She then shocked everyone when she returned to Great Pond the next winter, and the winter after that, proving that whimbrels have amazing site fidelity, returning to the exact same mudflat year after year.

In the three-and-a-half years Hope was monitored, she flew about 47,000 miles to migrate between St. Croix and her breeding grounds in the Mackenzie River Delta in the Arctic Circle. During the trip, Hope stops in coastal Virginia — where she was first trapped and tagged — and Southampton Island, Nunavut, Canada to rest and eat before continuing her journey.

Her transmitter broke in September 2012 and researchers came to St. Croix to trap her and remove her broken transmitter.

Hope's bright green leg tags were left on so local birders can still identify her when she returns to St. Croix each winter. Local bird watcher Lisa Yntema — who's photos are used in the book — has already spotted Hope this fall on St. Croix.

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 also is the site of the endangered least tern's breeding ground.

Hope weighs 14 ounces, is 17 inches long from the tip of her bill to her tail and has a 32-inch wingspan. A bright green tag on her leg identifies her.

Whimbrels can live up to 20 years, so birders on St. Croix may be able to spot Hope for years to come.

Log on at <http://ccb-wm.org/programs/migration/Whimbrel/maps.htm> to see Hope's past journeys.

For more information on donating to the book project call 774-6031. — Contact Aldeth Lewin at 714-9111 or email alewin@dailynews.vi

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