

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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NATION'S MOST ENDANGERED SPECIES MAY BECOME EXTINCT WITHIN FOUR YEARS

For the Nation's most endangered species, the dusky seaside sparrow of Florida's east coast, it may only be a matter of time. Only five of the small birds are known to exist--all males.

Despite intensive searches, no females have been found. In the last 5 years there have been no sightings of nests, fledglings, or females. The population of the species has drastically declined over the past 10 years. Since the birds (which are now in captivity at a breeding facility in Gainesville, Florida) are not capable of reproducing, the species is likely to become extinct in 4 years.

An expert "recovery team," developing plans to save this endangered species, recognized some time ago that there were very few options remaining for helping the bird. Even the area set aside for the species, the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge near Cape Canaveral, has been damaged by wildfire. One of the recovery team's final recommendations, concurred in by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, was to capture the remaining males before they were lost completely.

Over the last several weeks, personnel from the two agencies captured the remaining known duskies in the wild and are holding these last birds for safekeeping. No attempt will be made to mate these birds with other subspecies of seaside sparrows.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will continue its efforts to locate other birds in the wild in the remote possibility that a female does still exist. The habitat in the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge will be maintained in the hope that new findings or propagation techniques may make it possible to return birds to it. In the event that females are found, an emergency captive breeding activity will begin to attempt to propagate the birds for eventual release into the wild.

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The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission has also been involved with the recovery efforts. The breeding and habitat pens that the Commission has at Gainesville, Florida, where the birds are now being held, will be used temporarily until other facilities can be found. These pens were built by the State of Florida using U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service endangered species grant funds. The purpose of this effort was to develop bird handling techniques, using a species similar to the dusky (Scott's seaside sparrow), that could be used in a captive breeding situation should a female dusky be found. Results indicated that this effort was a success and could easily be adapted to the dusky. Unfortunately, without any females, the techniques may never be used on the duskies.

At the same time, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, is in the process of developing a reliable technique to breed these types of small songbirds. Sperm from the captive males may be frozen for future use in propagation if females are found.

The dusky seaside sparrow is the darkest of the seaside sparrows and about 6 inches long. It inhabited the brackish cordgrass marshes of the Indian River on Merritt Island and along the St. Johns River in northern Brevard County. Nests are constructed from grasses and are placed in tussocks very close to the ground in stands of grasswort, cordgrass, and wire grass. They feed primarily on invertebrates such as grasshoppers, crickets, and spiders.

The dusky seaside sparrow was discovered near Salt Lake in Brevard County in 1872 and populations probably remained stable at about 2,000 pair on Merritt Island until the 1940's when insecticides (mainly DDT) were widely applied to control salt marsh mosquitoes. A 70 percent reduction in dusky numbers by 1957 has been attributed to these insecticides. Further habitat disruption occurred beginning in the mid-1950's when the marshes were diked and water was impounded for mosquito control. Continued inundation resulted in the loss of salt marsh vegetation required by the dusky.

A 1968 survey in the St. Johns River basin showed a count of 372 singing male dusky seaside sparrows with an estimate of 894 pairs. Surveys on the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge in 1970 and 1972-1976 documented 143, 110, 54, 37, 47, and 11 singing males, respectively. No females or evidence of nesting have been seen since 1975 when winter wildfires burned most of the available habitat.

Highways, housing developments, drainage ditches, brush encroachment, and conversion of cordgrass savannas to improve pastures have all resulted in limiting preferred habitat to scattered patches. When fast moving wildfires burned these patches, duskies were either trapped by the fire and killed or temporarily forced into unsuitable habitat where high mortality may have occurred.

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