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The 1980 Dusky Seaside Sparrow Surrey

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Fla. Field Nat. 9(4) : 64, 1981.

Everglade Kite predation on a soft-shelled turtle.—In Florida, the Everglade Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) is considered (Stieglitz and Thompson 1967, U.S. Fish. Wild. Serv., Spec. Sci. Rep.-Wildl. 109: 1-109) to feed solely on one species of snail (*Pomacea paludosa*), although reports of nonsnail prey items (a small turtle, a small mammal) have been noted (Sykes and Kale 1974, Auk 91: 818-820). On 4 January 1979, at 1000, we saw an Everglade Kite perched in a tree along the Tamiami Trail (U.S. Highway 41), Dade County, approximately 35 km west of Miami, Florida. The kite, in juvenal or female plumage, was holding a small soft-shelled turtle (*Trionyx ferox*) in its bill. The kite dispatched the still struggling turtle while clutching it in its talons and striking it repeatedly with the beak. We watched the bird for 10 minutes, but the kite (probably disturbed by the observers) departed with the turtle still clutched in its talons. A photograph of this event, too poor for publication, has been deposited at the Florida Ornithological Society Archives, Florida State Museum. Improved understanding of the circumstances in which Everglade Kites demonstrate selection of nonsnail prey will further our knowledge of Everglade Kite feeding ecology.—MARC C. WOODIN AND CRYSTAL D. WOODIN, *Department of Entomology, Fisheries, and Wildlife, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota 55108.*

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The 1980 Dusky Seaside Sparrow survey.¹—The Dusky Seaside Sparrow (*Ammospiza maritima nigrescens*) was known only from areas of cordgrass (*Spartina bakerii*) in northern Brevard County, Florida, along the eastern drainage of the St. Johns River and in the tidal marshes of Merritt Island (Sharp 1970, Wilson Bull. 80: 158-166). Because of its declining numbers, the Dusky Seaside Sparrow was regarded as threatened with extinction by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1966 (USFWS, Resour. Publ. No. 34) and officially classified as an endangered population under the 1973 Endangered Species Act. In 1968 an estimated 894 Dusky Seaside Sparrows were in the St. Johns marsh and 34 were on Merritt Island where the original population may have been 2,000 pairs (Sharp 1970). Since 1968, annual Dusky Seaside Sparrow surveys indicated a steadily declining population. On Merritt Island, the last Dusky Seaside Sparrows seen were 2 birds in 1977 (Sykes 1980, Amer. Birds 34: 728-737). The St. Johns marsh population persisted a little longer. In 1977 and 1978 only 28 and 24 singing males, respectively, were found and during the 1979 survey, only 13 male Dusky Seaside Sparrows were left (11 on the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)). The last nest on the St. Johns marsh was seen in 1975 (James L. Baker, pers. comm.). Habitat loss was a major factor in the decline of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow. On Merritt Island the salt marshes were impounded for mosquito control (Sykes 1980). On the St. Johns marsh, drainage, housing developments, and highway construction all contributed to habitat loss. Extensive wildfires during the dry season (December-April 1973-1976) also contributed to the population decline (James L. Baker, pers. comm.).

¹Dedicated to the memory of Beau Sauselein who died on 9 June 1981 from burns received while fighting a wildfire on Merritt Island NWR.

In 1980 (14 April-14 June), biologists of the USFWS, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (FGFWFC), and Florida Audubon Society attempted to determine the size and distribution of the remaining Dusky Seaside Sparrow population. A special effort was made to locate a female for a captive propagation program.

Search areas within Brevard County were selected after aerial surveys were made of the Merritt Island NWR and the St. Johns River basin. Site selection was based on evaluation of potential habitat (Baker 1973, Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast Assoc. Game Fish Comm. 27: 207-214), recent burning, and historical distribution of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow (Bent 1968, Bull. U.S. Nat. Mus. 237: 849-859).

Four to 8 people walked transects 25 m apart through each survey area stopping frequently to make both visual and auditory observations. Each searcher had binoculars and 2-4 searchers had, in addition, a tape recording of the territorial vocalization of the male Dusky Seaside Sparrow used to stimulate a response from any males in the area. On 16 May, a 2-man helicopter rented from the Brevard County Mosquito Control District was used to scout several remote areas and on 3 additional days in May, a larger 5-man Bell Jet Ranger helicopter was used to reach these areas. This helicopter dropped searchers off on one side of an area, then picked them up on the opposite side. All morning surveys were conducted between sunrise and 0930. Evening searches were from 1700 until sunset. The census method was designed to search an entire area thoroughly and was similar to surveys conducted in 1978 and 1979.

After aerial survey of the St. Johns valley from south of S.R. 520 to S.R. 46 in March 1980, 23 areas were selected as potential habitat and searched by the methods described above (Fig. 1). Between 14 April-14 June, 471 morning and 100 evening man-hours were spent searching these areas and 11 hours of helicopter time were used. The search effort was usually expanded to include any marginal habitat adjacent to a selected search area. Most areas were searched twice during the season and areas where sparrows were found in 1979 were searched several times.

The search located 4 male Dusky Seaside Sparrows (Fig. 1). Two unbanded birds were found on 22 April near Titusville on private property south of State Road 50 (T23S, R34E, Sec. 1) about one mile west of the site occupied by 2 unbanded birds located in the 1979 survey (this area burned in January 1980). On 12 May a third bird, originally marked on 25 July 1978 with a USFWS aluminum band and an orange band, was located on the St. Johns unit of the St. Johns NWR (T22S, R34E, Sec. 22) north of S.R. 50, near where he was first captured and banded. This bird was last seen there on 26 May. Another male marked with a USFWS aluminum band and green band (banded 25 July 1978) was found 14 May on the Beeline unit of the Refuge (T23S, R34E, Sec. 29). This bird was probably also present on 7 May when Kale thought he heard a single Dusky Seaside Sparrow song, failed to hear it again, and concluded it was a distant Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) song.

On 16 May, Leenhouts and Sauselein found this bird singing on a territory north of S.R. 407 approximately 2 miles NW of his original location. He was observed back on his original territory on the Beeline unit on 29 May and was last seen there on 23 July.

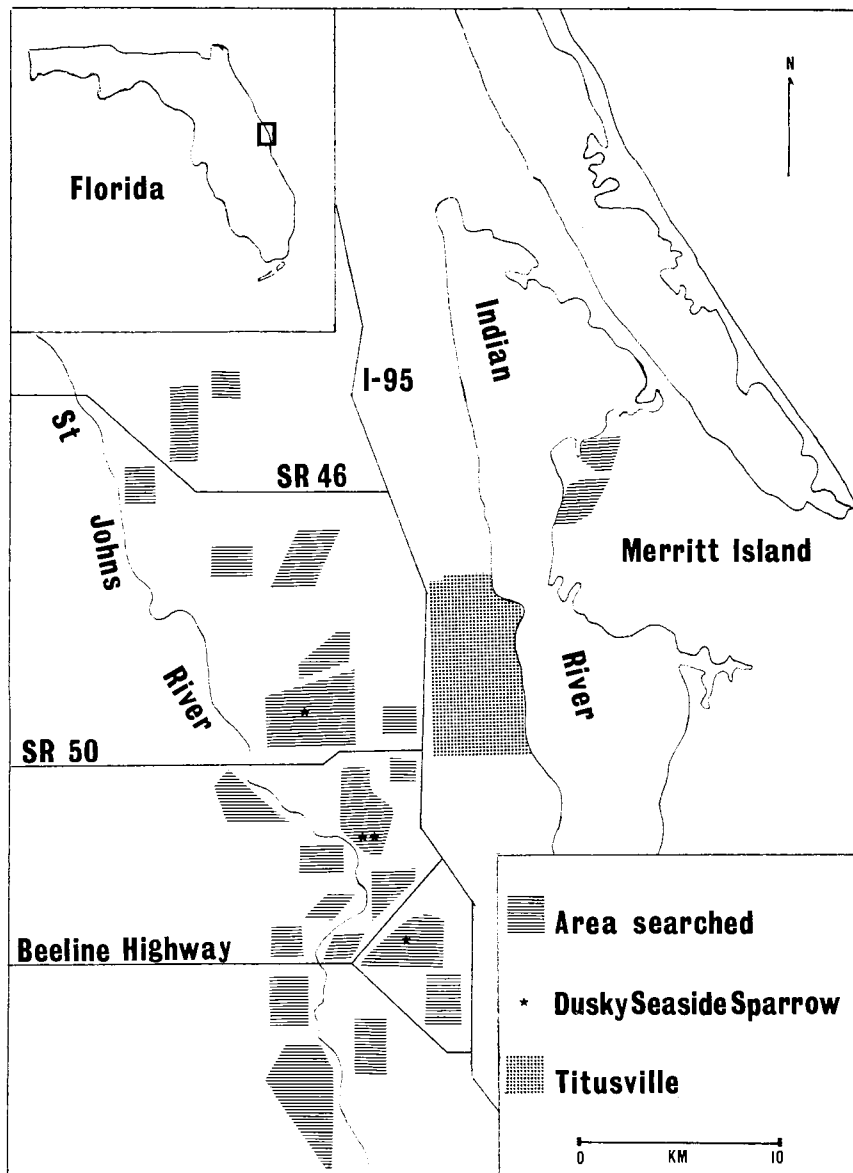


Fig. 1. Brevard County, Florida, areas searched for Dusky Seaside Sparrows in 1980.

Sixty-four hours were spent observing these 4 male birds to determine whether a female Dusky Seaside Sparrow was in the area. No female was seen and there were no indications of male breeding behavior other than repeated singing on their territories. Because female Seaside Sparrows are not secretive

during the nesting season, and if present, should have been seen and heard, we conclude that none existed.

These same 4 males had been counted in the 1979 survey when the known population of Dusky Seaside Sparrows was 13 males. Three of these birds were captured in the fall of 1979 and maintained in outdoor aviaries at the FGFWFC's Wildlife Research Laboratory in Gainesville, Florida. At the time of the 1980 survey, 2 males were still being held in captivity. In July 1980, 3 of the 4 remaining wild male Dusky Seaside Sparrows were captured and transported to Gainesville. Surprisingly, the sparrow with the orange band that had been last observed on the St. Johns unit of the Refuge on 26 May was netted 22 July on the Beeline unit, over 8 miles to the south and adjacent to the territory of the green banded male. Recent search efforts (23-25 July, 14-15 August, and 21-22 October) have failed to locate the latter sparrow. The 2 unbanded birds on private property were captured on 29 July and are now in Gainesville.

In 1981 (29 April - 19 June), 75 man-hours were spent searching for the green banded male and any previously undetected Dusky Seaside Sparrows. The search effort was concentrated in areas where birds were located in 1980 and survey methods were similar. No Dusky Seaside Sparrows were found in the 1981 survey.

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First sight record of Vaux's Swift in Florida.—The Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) breeds in the Pacific northwest from southeastern Alaska south to central California. In migration they occur regularly east to Montana, Nevada, and Arizona and have been reliably reported (October-March) as far east as southern Louisiana (A.O.U. 1957, Lowery 1974). The possibility that this species has occurred in Georgia and Florida has been suspected but identification of "late" or "early" swifts has been equivocal.

At 1750 on 4 December 1980, James Cox, Cathleen NeSmith and I observed six *Chaetura* swifts on the Florida State University campus in Tallahassee, Leon County, Florida. I recognized their characteristic weak, "wheezy" twitters as identical to calls of Vaux's Swifts I've heard on previous occasions in the