

Kids' Korner

Tiny Florida Sparrows Face Extinction Because of Lost Habitat

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — The protective custody of a \$60,000 cage on an obscure island in Walt Disney World is no fantasyland for the most endangered bird on Earth.

Tortured and ignored by man until it was too late, exiled forever from their salt marsh homeland, the last four dusky seaside sparrows flit about in desperate luxury, waiting for the end to come.

They are all males, 7 to 10 years old, brought in from the wild in 1979 and 1980. No female has been seen since 1975. The one male that evaded capture was last seen on July 23, 1980. Sometime within the next few years, barring a miracle, the dusky seaside sparrow (*Amospiza maritima nigrescens*) will be the first vertebrate creature to suffer extinction since the Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973.

Natural Home Destroyed

Over \$5 million has been spent since 1970 trying to save the tiny sparrow. Yet its small, isolated habitats were poisoned, flooded, burned and built upon so severely that the sparrow could no longer survive in freedom. Last October, after two decades of feuding, scientists and government wildlife officials threw in the towel and permitted Walt Disney World to take the final progeny off the public payroll.

There, surrounded by other endangered species on little-publicized Discovery Island, Disney biologists will attempt to breed the four males with similar seaside sparrows — a genetic "backcrossing" experiment that, if successful, could eventually produce a hybrid sparrow with over 98 percent of the dusky's genes and characteristics.

"I'm well aware of the risk involved," says Charles Cook, director of Discovery Island, a habitation of rare animals and birds from around the world. The island annually attracts less than 1 percent of all Disney visitors.

"You get people thinking and talking about the dusky and you might not save these last few but you might save something else," says Cook.

Now in Seclusion

The last four males, housed under heavy security, will not be displayed to the public. Instead, Scott's seaside sparrows and other close relatives of the dusky will take part in what Cook calls an "interpretative display."

A diorama will explain the bird's history, habits, and habitat, as well as the reasons for its impending extinction — an especially dramatic event considering that the mere presence of Disney World, less than an hour from the dusky's final range, had a direct effect on the sparrow's destruction.

The little bird's range has always been limited to the St. Johns River floodplain west of Titusville and the tidal marshes of North Merritt Island, in Brevard County. Before man intruded, thousands of the timorous sparrows inhabited the vast short-grass savannahs of both areas.

It is doubtful more than a few Floridians have even seen a dusky seaside sparrow. Weighing less than an ounce, it is a black and white canary-sized bird which spent most of its time darting about the ground rather than treetops. It is the most distinctive of all the seaside sparrows that range the vanishing coastal salt marshes from New England to Mexico.

Undoubtedly, the sparrow's inconspicuous place in the animal kingdom hierarchy — far below the flamboyant eagles and whooping cranes — would later contribute to its downfall. "The rule of thumb is: If it weighs less than a pound and is smaller than a breadbox, nobody cares," is the candid observation of Bill Leenhouts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Assaulted By DDT

The dusky's troubles began immediately after World War II when the Brevard County Mosquito Control District tried to rid Merritt Island of the salt marsh mosquito — a serious obstacle to the growth that was expected in this virgin area. Massive spraying of DDT and other pesticides contributed to the 75 percent drop in dusky numbers between 1946 and 1962.

When the National Aeronautics and Space Administration acquired the area in 1962, engineers flooded as much of it as possible so the mud-breeding mosquitoes would have no place to lay their eggs.

It worked. It also destroyed the marsh. By 1968, only 70 pairs of dusksies remained on Merritt Island, which by then, ironically, was a Fish and Wildlife refuge. Meanwhile, University of Wisconsin graduate student Brian Sharp found nearly 900 pairs of dusksies on the St. Johns marsh — an area which had not been explored by ornithologists since Charles Maynard first discovered the dusky there a century before.

But this was 1969 — not a good environmental year in this part of the globe. The space program was at its peak; man would walk on the moon by summer. Brevard's population had grown 800 percent since NASA moved in. And, a few



One of the last four dusky seaside sparrows in the world lives out his days in a habitat created for him and his three kin on an island in Walt Disney World. No female of the apparently doomed species has been seen for almost a decade. Its natural habitat on the floodplain near Florida's Atlantic coast was devastated by highways, range fires, and growth associated with the space program.

miles inland, construction had begun on the world's largest family entertainment complex — Walt Disney World.

To facilitate an expected overload of traffic and to provide a safer, more direct route from Brevard beaches to Disney World, the state built the controversial Bee Line Expressway — which split into a Y right in the middle of the most populous dusky habitat.

The Endangered Species Act,

among a host of environmental laws passed since 1969, would make it impossible to build that highway today. "One day there was a marsh," says Florida Audubon ornithologist Herb Kale, who led a losing battle against the Bee Line, "and the next there was a highway."

Ranchers Started Fires

The wind-down of the space program and gas shortages kept

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| 4. BLUE | 9. LT. BLUE |
| 5. BROWN | 10. LT. GREEN |

HELIUM IS A VERY LIGHT GAS. BLIMPS ARE OFTEN FILLED WITH HELIUM BECAUSE THIS GAS WILL NOT BURN. IN 1868 SCIENTISTS DISCOVERED HELIUM IN THE SUN. 30 YEARS LATER THEY DISCOVERED IT ON THE EARTH. HELIUM IS FOUND IN NATURAL GAS. ALMOST ALL OF IT IS PRODUCED IN THE UNITED STATES.

