

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow

Ammodramus maritimus mirabilis

Region:

Southeast

Area affected:

Everglades National Park

Climatic change:

Strong storms, change in fire regime

Impact:

Habitat loss, mortality

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Seaside sparrows are found exclusively in grassy marshes along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Most live in salt to brackish marshes, but the endangered Cape Sable subspecies, endemic to the Everglades, requires a particular freshwater marsh habitat called “marl prairie.” This habitat is flooded with a few inches of water from late summer to early winter, but dries out from late winter through much of the summer. The habitat also requires fire at roughly 10-year intervals to prevent shrubs and trees from overtaking the grasses. The sparrows breed in the dry season, building nests in the grasses about six inches above the ground. They eat a wide variety of insects and other small invertebrates.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

The seaside sparrow has the distinction of having been driven from its namesake location by a severe weather event. Originally discovered on Cape Sable in the southwest tip of Florida, the species has not had a stronghold there since the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 caused major changes in the vegetation and hydrology, which transitioned the area to salt marsh and mangrove. Unfortunately, the climate-related blows have kept coming. A population in Big Cypress National Preserve was extirpated following a series of wildfires in the 1960s. **The remaining population in the Everglades declined by half—from 6,600 to 3,300 birds—following the direct hit from Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and has remained at or below that level ever since.** Ongoing water management activities have probably impeded recovery, and although their habitat needs some fire, the birds have taken a hit from uncharacteristically severe fires in recent years. Populations declined by a further 80 percent in 2008, when unusually large wildfires struck critical habitat in the Everglades, and 2009 surveys found that three of the six subpopulations contained no female birds.

References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1999. Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow. Pages 4-345 – 4-370 in *South Florida Multi-Species Recovery Plan*. <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/MSRPPDFs/CapeSableSeasideSparrow.pdf>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow 5-Year Review. http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc3272.pdf



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