

The dwindling dusky

A small brown songbird called the dusky seaside sparrow may be even closer to extinction than the whooping crane

by Jonathan Eberhart

In the marshes around America's spaceport, Kennedy Space Center, live the last few specimens of a bird that may be closer to extinction than even the much-mourned whooping crane. While the whooper might make a gradual comeback if protected and left alone, the dusky seaside sparrow is as good as dead unless man steps in to lend an active hand.

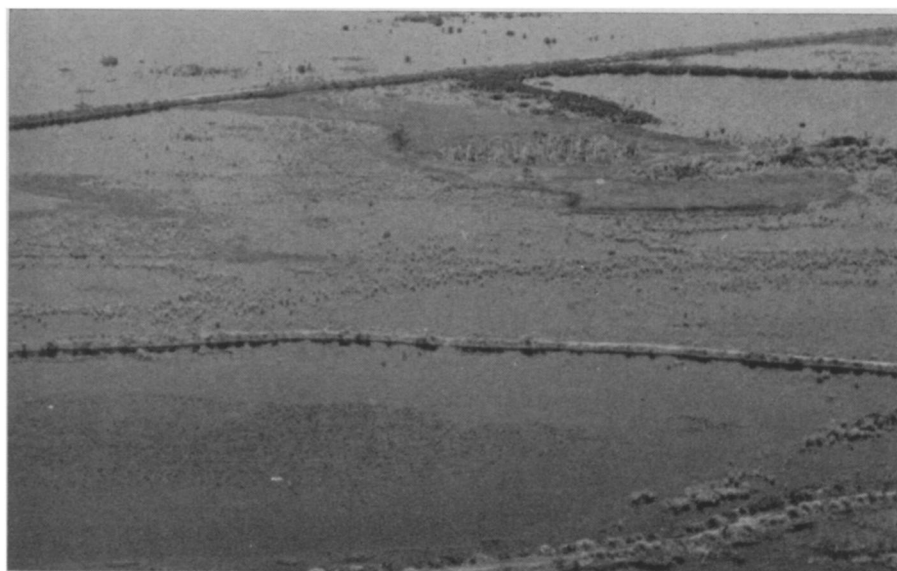
The melodious little dusky is believed to exist nowhere in the world except the salt marsh areas surrounding Kennedy. Now, however, he has fallen victim to control measures that were originally designed to keep down Florida's voracious mosquitoes.

There's no question that the mosquitoes need keeping down. In the mid-1950's millions of them were driving residents in the nearby Titusville area to distraction, until the Brevard County Mosquito Control District took action. A series of three-to-four-foot-high earth dikes or impoundments was constructed, running for miles over the comparatively dry marshland. They were designed to accumulate rainwater and flood out the insects, which need mud flats to complete their life cycle.

Unfortunately, the dikes have also almost flooded out the duskies. The various marsh grasses in which the birds make their nests have been drowned over all but a tiny area. As a result, after almost a month of painstaking searching, University of Wisconsin graduate student Brian Sharp found only 17 male birds, and believes that there are probably few if any more than that. Since the dusky is monogamous, there would be a similar number of females, which means that the total population could consist of as few as 34 adults, plus their offspring.

By contrast, there are 58 known whooping cranes, 12 of which are living carefully unbothered lives in captivity. (Until recently, there were 59. On April 15, a high school boy in Kansas found one dead after it had apparently struck a high-tension line.)

Sharp is living at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge while he takes his census, gathering data for a thesis on the dusky. "He really puts on a show of bravado," says Sharp of the bird,



Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

The dike-crossed salt marsh harbors burgeoning waterbirds, dwindling duskies.

"flying around his own little territory to make sure no other dusky males have invaded it. What he doesn't realize is that he is challenging nonexistent rivals."

The dusky's numbers have been dwindling rapidly. Only four years ago, the Interior Department, gathering data for its upcoming "rare and endangered species" list, was informed that as many as 200 of the birds were living in the marsh, and possibly up to 500. Meanwhile, Sharp says, the dusky is "singing away as though he doesn't know he is becoming extinct."

The bird is not an eyecatcher, with his dark grayish-brown wings and back and black-striped white breast, especially compared to the spectacular egrets and herons that share the marshland. The water birds, in fact, have been flourishing since the flooding began. There are 22 species of waterfowl on the island, according to Sharp, and their numbers are increasing. But the dusky is not faring so well.

In 1964, a researcher from the University of California surveyed the area

and recommended that a tidal strip be left inland from the dikes, along the Indian River. Money was tight, however, especially for ordinary-looking brown birds, and as refuge manager Curtis Wilson says, "it's a little late for that now."

Sharp emphasizes that the Mosquito Control District officials are being quite helpful, even lending him a helicopter for his work. "They'd hate to have an extinction on their record," is his wry comment. But there just aren't any obvious solutions.

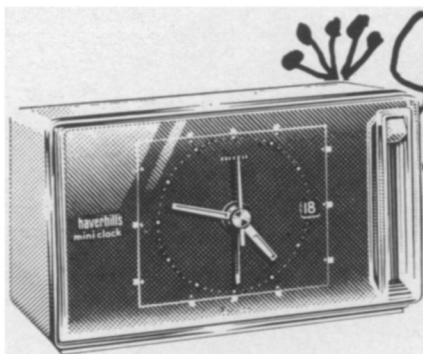
No one is about to tear down the dikes, which took more than a year to build and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Had there been a little foresight, indicates Sharp, a dry strip might have been left for the birds. "The first thing to do now," he says, "is develop a sense of emergency."

The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife of the U.S. Interior Department is in on the problem, and has a full-time rare-and-endangered-species biologist named Paul Sykes in the area sending weekly reports on the dusky



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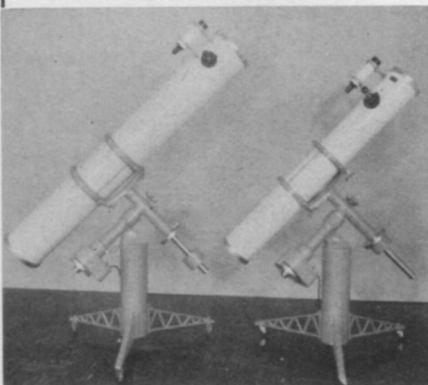
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and another rare bird, the Everglade kite. "The process of doing something about this is not bogged down in bureaucracy," insists a bureau official, though he admits that "we are just beginning to work into specific concerns with the bird," four years after it was described as an endangered species.

Two kinds of analysis are needed before a true solution can be found, says the bureau's man. The first is knowledge of the birds' detailed whereabouts; the second is a way to balance help for the dusky with the need for continued mosquito control. "So to be doing something," he says, "we don't have to be pumping water or digging."

One idea that is under consideration, however, is the creation of sub-impoundments—diked-off areas that could be built within the presently flooded areas and then drained to give the duskies at least a small increase in living space.

Rep. Edward J. Gurney, Republican Congressman from the Cape Kennedy district of Florida, also plans to bring the bird's plight before conservation groups, in hopes of turning up ideas.

There may be an alternate route to salvation for the dusky—but it's a rough one. Inland from Merritt Island and Cape Kennedy is the St. Johns River, running northward toward the Georgia border. In 1962, a survey located 10 duskies there, but that is the last information available on the area.

The marshy area where the birds might live is much larger than that on Merritt Island, and conditions there are more suitable for the kinds of grasses in which the dusky characteristically likes to nest. Yet for some unknown reason the dusky population may be even smaller there than near the Cape. Sharp is now surveying the St. Johns area, a monumental task for one man, and he very well may still be at the job well into June.

The obvious idea is that some duskies might be moved from Merritt to new homes along the St. Johns, but with so few birds left, experimentation is risky. Furthermore, only the young birds, just out of the nest, can be moved, says Sharp, since the adults will just fly back again to their old nesting sites. And even if there are enough fledglings to try the idea, it is not known whether they will be able to survive on their own. Finally, to make matters still worse, there is reportedly a flood-control project planned for the upper St. Johns near Jacksonville, but it is not known yet whether it would destroy potential dusky land.

Meanwhile the counting goes on, as the dusky teeters on the brink of non-existence. "It's quite an experience," says Sharp bleakly, "being witness to a process of extinction."