

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#17 DUSKY SEASIDE SPARROW



Photo:
US Fish & Wildlife Service

The Dusky Seaside Sparrow, *Ammodramus maritimus nigrescens*, was a non-migratory subspecies of the Seaside Sparrow, *Ammodramus maritimus*, and was found in the natural salt marshes of Merritt Island and along the St. John's River in Southern Florida . It was officially declared extinct in December of 1990.

The species demise began in 1940 when DDT was sprayed on the marshes to control mosquitoes. This entered the bird's food chain and caused the population to fall from 2,000 to 600 breeding pairs. Then Merritt Island was flooded to try and reduce the mosquito population around Kennedy Space Center, the species' major nesting sites were destroyed, and their numbers crashed. A further setback occurred when the marshes surrounding the river were drained, to facilitate highway construction. Eventually, habitat loss, pollution and pesticides took such a high toll that by 1979, only six Dusky Seaside Sparrows were left – all males. The last sighting of a female was in 1975.

In 1979 it was decided to captive breed the remaining Dusky Seaside Sparrows by hybridising them with female Scott's Seaside Sparrows (*A. m. peninsulae*) from Florida's gulf coast. In 1980 there were five dusky seaside sparrows in a captive breeding facility in Gainesville, Florida.

One, banded in 1978 with an orange leg-band, was unique. "Orange Band" was left by himself in wild in the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Field observations of colour-banded Dusky Seaside Sparrows from 1975 to 1979 showed that they seldom travelled more than 1.5 to 3km (1 to 2 miles) in their lifetime. In April 1980, "Orange Band" was again observed in the St. Johns NWR. However, in June of the same year he was surprisingly recaptured 13km (8 miles) to the south in the company of a Dusky with a green leg-band. Before finding "Green Band", "Orange Band" passed through the territory of the two remaining unbanded birds.

In 1983 the last four Dusky Seaside Sparrows were taken to the Walt Disney World Resort, to continue crossbreeding, and to live out their days in the protected habitat on the Discovery Island Nature Reserve. By March 31st, 1986, only one, "Orange Band", remained. Despite being blind in one eye, "Orange Band" lived at least eight years, and possibly as many as thirteen, before dying on the 17th of June 1987.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia