

WAKULLA SEASIDE SPARROW

By Libby Hopkins



The Wakulla Seaside Sparrow, or *Ammodramus Maritimus* as it's known by its scientific name, is grayish-brown or grayish-olive on the upper part of its body with a brown breast, long bill, and short pointed tail.

The Wakulla Seaside Sparrow is almost always found in salt and brackish marshes, occurs along the Atlantic Coast of the United States from New Hampshire to Central Florida, and along the Gulf Coast from Central Florida to Central Texas.

The diet of the Wakulla Seaside Sparrow primarily consists of crustaceans, insects, spiders, and seeds, mainly from the marsh floor. Foraging acts include searching through the mud with their bill. Wakulla Seaside Sparrows nest in clumps of fallen black needle rush and cordgrass.

Nesting is unique because they build two different types of nests. Open nests are built deep in vegetation, while more complicated domed nests are built in less dense vegetation. A canopy is developed over the nests by pulling down blades of grass. During one nesting, three to four eggs will be laid, with incubation lasting 12 to 13 days. Young seaside sparrows can fly at nine to 10 days of age.

The Wakulla Seaside Sparrow has the potential to be a good "indicator species" of the health of salt marshes. Where the marshes are in good condition, the birds are abundant; where the marshes are degraded, they are less common or absent. Degradation of habitat—walling, diking, draining, and pollution, are the principal threats to this species, having resulted in the extirpation of multiple populations, including several named taxa along the Atlantic coast, where the species has been closely studied.

First described and named by Alexander Wilson, the "Father of American Ornithology," in 1811, the Wakulla Seaside Sparrow is a polytypic species, which is a species showing geographic variation. Three species of Seaside Sparrows are recognized: the Wakulla Seaside Sparrow, the Dusky Seaside Sparrow, and the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow.

The Dusky Seaside Sparrows were common in the salt marshes on Merritt Island, and in nearby freshwater marshes west of the Indian River along the St. Johns River. Merritt Island is adjacent to Cape Canaveral.

The Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow is the most isolated of all the Seaside Sparrows. It was first named in 1918 from a population living in marl prairie on Cape Sable in Monroe County, Florida.

Habitat destruction and fragmentation are the main threats to the Wakulla Seaside Sparrow and other Seaside Sparrow populations. Salt marshes are vulnerable from the practice of "dredge and fill." Dredge and fill involve the dredging of salt marshes and filling them with sediment. This practice is performed to provide increased areas for human development, including coastal housing. Salt marshes are also threatened by dam operations, chemicals and toxins, invasive plants, road and bridge construction, industrial/oil spills, and shore hardening. Wakulla Seaside Sparrows will desert their salt marsh habitat when woody vegetation becomes too dominant. Other threats include increased predation and nesting site competition with rice rats.

The Wakulla seaside sparrow is protected by the U.S. Migratory Bird Treaty Act and is a State-designated Threatened species under Florida's Endangered and Threatened Species Rule.

