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. No longer than a golf ball, the Cape Sable seaside sparrow is speckled with tan and brown all over its body and has a distinctive yellow mark around its eyes. 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. Unusually large wildfires in the region in 2008 took a further toll, and as of 2021, the population stands at just under 2,500 birds.** 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. With sea level rise projected to increase by 1 to 8 feet in seaside sparrow habitats by the end of the century, much of the low-lying habitat that the Cape Sable seaside sparrows depend on for survival is at risk of disappearing.

References

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