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A rare breed

Carolyn Hendry Wyatt is one-of-a-kind as far as extension agents in the Heartland go. **DETAILS, Agri-Leader**

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INFORMING TODAY, SHAPING TOMORROW

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SEBRING — Ecologists consider it one of the most endangered birds in North America.

Mostly black and gray with speckles of brown on the nape and the back, the Florida grasshopper sparrow, which calls central Florida home, is heard more than it is seen.

Archbold Biological Station's Reed Bowman, who has been studying these reclusive subspecies of the grasshopper sparrows on public land such as the Avon Park Bombing Range, estimates there are 200 of them left.

The secretive bird, which is 5 inches long, runs more than it flies, he explained.

In spring, the males peek out of the scrub and grassland of central Florida's dry prairie to sing

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TAMPA TRIBUNE/FILE

A gopher tortoise makes its way along at James E. Grey Preserve.

Conservation funds to help endangered county species

BY PALLAVI AGARWAL
Highlands Today

Conservation

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on top of vegetation and claim their territory. That's when ecologists try to count them. The females stay under the radar and remain there, eluding the human eye.

The bird's population has been under assault as its natural habitat has been lost to urban development, but more perplexing is how the best management practices ecologists have put in place the last 10 years to conserve the bird have not stopped its decline, Bowman said.

Surveys in 2004 found seven occupied locations, with a total estimated 1,000 birds. Surveys in 2012 indicated the lowest number of males ever seen on public land: 75 singing males on three properties — the bombing range, the Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, and Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area.

In April, they counted one singing male on the Avon Park Bombing Range.



COURTESY PHOTO

A Florida grasshopper sparrow sits perched on a tree. The bird, which calls Highlands County home, is considered one of the most endangered birds in North America.

Dry prairie depends on fire to keep its ecological balance. Researchers had been conducting controlled burns on a pretty regular basis, Bowman said. "Clearly, we didn't understand the nuances," he said.

This roadblock means ecologists have gone back to the drawing board to review treatment data and consider other factors that could be contributing to the continuing decline of the sparrows, but as time marches on, the danger of losing for ever one of Central Florida native critters is very real, Bowman said.



The endangered short-tailed birds are one of central Florida's threatened or endangered species that stand to benefit from a new round of conservation money the United States Department of Agriculture announced recently.

One hundred and fifteen "high-impact" projects nationwide, including in Florida, will receive more than \$370 million as part of the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program, administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"The program's public-private partnership enables companies, communities and other nongovernment entities to further conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife on a regional scale," USDA said in a news release. "Partners provide matching funding, with the total budget to be spent in five years."

In Florida, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conser-

vation Commission will lead the Regional Partnership for Conservation of Gopher Tortoise and At-Risk Species Habitat, of which Highlands County is one of the affected areas, including Polk, Osceola, Okeechobee, Hardee, Desoto and Glades counties.

The plan is to save and protect threatened and endangered species by restoring dwindling habitat within almost five million acres.

The \$2 million project will provide support for conservation planning, outreach and technical assistance through NRCS programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

Conservation practices to improve forest stand structures, conduct prescribed burning, plant field borders and restore rare or declining habitats is intended to help also the gopher tortoise, Florida panther and other threatened and endangered species.



FWC spokeswoman Carli Segelson said the acreage affected will depend on how many landowners participate.

FWC will start the program once it has finalized an agreement with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"All of the cost-share and easement dollars will be applied to private land and private landowners," she said.

The goal is not only to improve habitat conditions, Segelson said, but to create and maintain habitat connectivity on land

that is important to the imperiled species, she said.

How the program affects Highlands County, she said, depends on how many landowners sign up for the program and the size, location and nature of their property in regards to these species.

"Cost-share agreements and conservation easements, whether short-term or long-term, will be considered on a case-by-case basis," Segelson said.

Whether the program helps the sparrows remains to be seen. Because of the unknowns that still exist in rehabilitating their numbers, Bowman thinks it may not have a huge effect.

However, conservation efforts have improved the numbers of some of the other imperiled critters such as the Florida panther. While the big cats remain endangered, their numbers these days are higher than what they were in the 1970s. Highlands is one of the 16 Florida counties where panthers are known to exist.

To find out more information about the program, landowners should contact their Regional Landowner Assistance Program administrator, by going to <http://myfwc.com/conservation/special-initiatives/lap/contact-us/>.

More information on the FWC's Land Owner Assistance Program can be found at <http://myfwc.com/conservation/special-initiatives/lap/>