A Feathery Field of View

The summer heat is enervating, but we've had some exciting developments that help to keep our spirits high. Good news on the sparrow front is featured in our lead article, but we also had stellar outcomes in our Brown-headed Nuthatch project when we set a new banding record for young (252). The previous record was 152.

The record came thanks to the help of Dave McElveen, one of our most important volunteers. Last fall, Dave roamed Tall Timbers looking for the dead trees that nuthatches typically select when excavating cavities.

—Feathery Field continued on page 3

Smoothing Out a Tough Move

The Florida Grasshopper Sparrow could use some good news.

It's one of the most endangered birds in the world with a population totaling fewer than 300 individuals. It occurs only in south-central Florida, and population trends are discouragingly downward.

Reasons behind the declines are unknown, but, to buy time, wildlife agencies want to establish a captive population to preserve this grassland specialist while the search for a solution continues.

Captive breeding works for some birds — think condors and cranes — but it has not been tried for a small, grassland songbird. Attempts to breed the Dusky Seaside Sparrow in captivity failed in short order, and it's assumed to be a risky option for other sparrows as well.

Fortunately, the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow has a close cousin — the Eastern Grasshopper Sparrow — that is not endangered and can be used to determine whether captive breeding might work. The southern-most breeding population for this close cousin occurs on old airfield near Bainbridge, Georgia, and looks as though a treeless bit of Oklahoma was somehow replanted in southwest Georgia.

— Sparrow continued on page 2
Thanks to a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Stoddard Bird Lab is using the Bainbridge sparrow population to supply eggs, nestlings, and adults to the White Oak Conservation Holdings near Jacksonville, Florida. White Oak specializes in captive breeding, and the goal is to work out details for Eastern Grasshopper Sparrows before captive breeding is attempted with the critically endangered Florida Grasshopper Sparrow.

On June 24, Lily, our mixed black lab dog, sniffed out a nest with eight day-old nestlings. Lily was donated to the Stoddard Bird Lab in 2012 by Greg Oyer, principal trainer at Beechwood Plantation. Over the past two years, she’s been trained to find nests and sit patiently if she hopes to receive a big reward.

The young sparrows would fledge in a day or two but still beg for food and attention from the adults for many more weeks. Their age provided an opportunity to test whether the compelling urge to feed young might make the move to captivity go more smoothly for the adults. Once released in the large enclosures at White Oak, the begging notes of fledged young scampering all around might override adult concerns about their new surroundings.

We set up nets and snared the female within a couple of minutes. The male hit the net, bounced out, but then returned with food about five minutes later. We watched him drop to the nest and made a mad dash in hopes of flushing him off the ground and directly into a net. A few minutes later, we were heading to Jacksonville with adults in transport boxes and three late-stage nestlings.

We fed everyone mealworms on the way over and enjoyed the infrequent vocal exchanges between the young and adults. Around 1:00 PM, we transferred the family to Andrew Schumann, Animal Collection Manager at White Oak, at a gas station along on I-10. He headed back to White Oak, and we headed back to Tallahassee fraught with anticipation. Nothing like this had ever been attempted, and the possible outcomes were all over the map.

Around 5:00 PM, Andrew sent a very cautious but promising email:

_I can share an encouraging observation. I just saw the female walking through the grasses in the enclosure gathering mealworms in her beak, sometimes 5 or 6 at a time, and feeding the 3 fledglings at the nest. Male seems jumpy, but things are looking good so far._

—Sparrow continued on next page

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**Event Calendar**

**BirdQuest 2015**

**Thursday, October 8**  
Help support our most important fundraiser of the year. See page 1, and then make your pledge there.

**Other Events & Outings**

**Saturday, September 26**  
Field trip at the FSU Marine Lab

**Saturday, October 3**  
Presentation at Wing and Wildflowers Festival, Leesburg, – The Florida Breeding Bird Atlas.

**Sunday, October 4**  
Presentation at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge: *Sex in the Sitta – the Intriguing Life of the Brown-headed Nuthatch*

**Tuesday, October 6**  
Special Stoddard Bird Lab presentation: *The Birds Of Cuba.* Nils Navarro will talk about the birdlife in Pinar del Rio, an ecological treasure in western Cuba. Light social starts at 6:30 PM; presentation starts at 7:00 PM. To register (required) contact firebird@ttrs.org

**September 25 - October 25**  
Seven Days of Opening Nets. Bird banding demonstrations at several Tallahassee parks during the peak of migration. Contact firebird@ttrs.org

**Saturday, November 7 and Saturday, December 5**  
First Saturday morning bird trip on Tall Timbers. Meet at 8 AM at entrance to the Wade Research Center. To register (required) contact firebird@ttrs.org

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*Sparrow continued from front page—*

Jim Cox, Mary Mack Gray and Lily with sparrows captured at the Bainbridge airfield.
Grant Support

The Stoddard Bird Lab received $41,300 in support of two research/management projects. In addition to the work with Grasshopper Sparrows, a grant from the Georgia Department of Natural Resource enabled Todd Engstrom and intern Anica Sunshine to monitor Red-cockaded Woodpeckers on Silver Lake Wildlife Management Area near Bainbridge, Georgia. The lab has also received $13,500 of in-kind support for graduate student projects and woodpecker management.

Publications


The lab also submitted a manuscript describing agonistic behavior and burrow competition among juvenile gopher tortoises.

Sparrow continued—

The promising news continued the next day. The adults were not thrashing wildly about in the enclosure; both were feeding young and even huddling with young during rainstorms. We repeated these procedures two weeks later for another nest and, once again, the adults fed the nestlings soon after the family was placed in the enclosure.

Much like the stress that humans feel when they hear a crying baby, the begging notes of young sparrows is difficult for adults to ignore even when they’re in totally new surroundings.

There’s more testing to be done, but this certainly was welcome news. The Stoddard Lab provided eggs that the folks at White Oaks also raised successfully, but nothing was as efficient as transfer of family groups. The adults do the hard work of feeding young, and they are also there to provide essential stimuli such as buzzy songs, alarm notes, and other behavioral cues. Learning such behaviors can be critical for young birds if they are to develop properly.

Fingers are crossed, but it’s a bit of good news on the sparrow front, and perhaps beyond. There are many rare songbirds in the world, and transfer of complete family groups should be considered where captive breeding is contemplated.

Feathery Field continued—

He felled a half dozen or so, cut them again into 3-foot segments, and then sliced the segments in half so we could excavate a small cup large enough to hold a nest. It takes 2-3 weeks for nuthatches to do the work, but we had them ready to go in 30-45 minutes.

We put out 45 artificial nest structures and 35 were in use by mid-March. The structures make it easy to measure eggs and nestlings (daily if needed), and a stove-pipe wrapped around the poles effectively deterred predatory snakes. The tool dramatically improves the data we can gather and provides us with a chance to monitor activities in the nest using a small endoscopic camera. We will be devoting more time next year to measuring the growth and development of young nuthatches, collecting better information on nestling interactions, and improving overall productivity.

—Feathery Field continued on back page
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Outreach
The Stoddard Bird Lab made 10 presentations that reached over 700 outdoor enthusiasts during the first half of 2015.

Keynote presentations were made to the Georgia Botanical Society, Florida Native Plant Society, Florida Ornithological Society, and Enlightening Bites, a lunchtime series in Thomasville, Georgia.

Staff led nine field tours (reaching 370), hosted the spring meeting of the Florida Ornithological Society (75 attendees).

Interviews featured on WFSU radio and TV also reached thousands of additional eyes and ears!

Membership has benefits—the Tall Timbers Firebird and eJournal are two of them.

Join today.

Got Red-heads?
Intern Anica Sunshine monitored Red-headed Woodpecker nesting activity on Tall Timbers and Arcadia Plantation this summer. This beautiful bird with the garish crimson head occurs throughout eastern North America but is declining rapidly. Couple its bold markings with a preference for open forests and it’s easy to see that tracking nesting activity for this species of conservation concern might take just a pair of good binoculars and a few minutes of patient observation.

Anica found woodpeckers defending dead trees and revisited the sites twice a week to record activities. Some adults never attracted mates despite their frequent calling and drumming. Paired birds could be seen peering out of cavities suggesting incubation was underway, while other pairs brought food for nestlings. Later on, the dark heads of advanced young birds could be seen at some cavity entrances.

These observations could serve as the foundations of a Citizen Science project in which bird enthusiasts observe woodpeckers in their neighborhoods. Taking just ten minutes a few times each week to watch Red-headed Woodpeckers could provide important data about breeding success and threats. For example, a strong thunderstorm in late June knocked down several nests on Tall Timbers but did not have similar effects on Arcadia Plantation. Isolated downbursts could have led to such differences or perhaps differences in forest conditions.

The plan is to undertake beta testing of a project next year with local Audubon Chapters and university classes. We also plan to develop a phone app that will enable participants to log their observations in the field. All in all, there could be lots of great information generated for one of the brightest birds in the forest.

Other highlights included:

- Excavation of 25 artificial woodpecker cavities on Red Hills’ properties;
- Hosted a special workshop on the Safe Harbor Program (60 participants);
- Presented a webinar on burning for birds that attracted 250 participants (listen at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFyftojehrM).

Many thanks to Dave McElveen for his outstanding work with nut-hatches and other field efforts. We also appreciate the great efforts of Juan Botero, Joe Burnam, Jess Cusick, Adrienne Doyle, Mary Mack Gray, Michael Keys, and Anica Sunshine. The crew gathered absolutely great data on our many projects and contributed to the newsletter as well.

Feathery Field continued—

A Red-headed Woodpecker at an artificial cavity originally intended for a Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Photo by Tara Tanaka.