

BOOK REVIEW: *A Shadow and A Song*

by John Kricher

A Shadow and a Song by Mark Jerome Walters. Post Hills, Vermont, Chelsea Green Publishing Company. 1992; [xvi+] 238 pages; one black-and-white illustration; \$21.95.

I still have my first copy of *A Field Guide to the Birds*, purchased in 1957, and, in that edition, the final plate is titled, "Some Florida Specialties." Among the birds illustrated is the Dusky Seaside Sparrow, perhaps one of the least spectacular among such species as Smooth-billed Ani, Gray Kingbird, Scrub Jay, and White-crowned Pigeon. Nonetheless, this unique, darkly plumaged sparrow was an abundant resident in a small area of broomgrass marshes in east Florida, at Merritt Island and Titusville, an area now known for its rocket launchings at Cape Canaveral.

Was. The Dusky Seaside Sparrow is extinct. Mark Walters, an author who grew up in the Cape Canaveral region, has thoroughly, often eloquently, documented the sad history of how fate overtook the Dusky.

The entire range of the Dusky was within Brevard County, an area, like many other areas in Florida, eager for economic growth. Opportunity knocked loudly in October 1957 when Russia launched Sputnik and the space race began. The United States would eventually win the race to the moon. The Dusky Seaside Sparrow would be one of the losers. In 1989 the last Dusky, an old male named Orange, died in a deteriorating aviary at Walt Disney World.

Walters tells the story of the Dusky chronologically and sympathetically, with strong nostalgic overtones. He describes how the ecology of the east coast of Florida used to be and will never be again. This is a book that challenges the traditional values derived from the economic definition of "progress." The demise of the Dusky is a complex and fascinating story that interweaves NASA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the political concerns of Brevard County, and the work of a handful of dedicated, often frustrated field ornithologists.

The Dusky's troubles began in the 1940s, well before NASA was conceived. DDT, the miracle pesticide that had proved so effective during World War II, was applied in earnest to control mosquitos that abounded in the marshes around Merritt Island and Titusville. Dusky's began to significantly decline. In the 1950s extensive ditching and impounding was added to the war against mosquitos, and the areas of broomgrass, once prime Dusky habitat, began to disappear as a result of the marsh alterations. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service saw little problem at this point since the changes created improved habitat for waterfowl, pleasing hunters immensely. Local mosquito control officials were considered heroes of a sort. Ducks won; Dusky's lost. Once NASA was added to the picture, the Dusky was doomed. Mosquito control,

believe it or not, became an issue of "national security." Efforts to eradicate mosquitos were stepped up even more.

As NASA grew, so did Brevard County. Expressways had to be built, and built they were, right through the remaining marshes where Duskiess bred. Housing developments also claimed much of the dwindling habitat. Throughout this rapid period of development, it was well known that Duskiess were suffering, but both local and federal political considerations ultimately took top priority. Duskiess became not only vastly reduced, but also severely fragmented as a population. A National Wildlife Refuge, also fragmented, was created ostensibly to protect the sparrow--after the bird had essentially been eliminated from most of its former habitat.

Reminiscent of the Heath Hen on Martha's Vineyard, the Dusky Seaside Sparrow suffered its fatal blow when a series of wildfires occurred during the late 1970s. The last Dusky to live in the wild was captured in 1980, when a frantic decision was made to try and save the population, now down to a handful, through captive breeding. If there was ever an example of a decision that was "too little, too late," it had to be the Dusky captive breeding decision. One problem surfaced quickly. There were only male Duskiess, no females could be found. A group of presumably frustrated male Duskiess were shuffled around for several years, eventually coming to reside in, of all places, Disney World. For these last Duskiess, the Magic Kingdom was their final stop on the road to oblivion.

Because of the lack of any female Duskiess, the captive breeding program never happened—except it did. The Dusky Seaside Sparrow is not a species, it is a subspecies of Seaside Sparrow. The remaining few male Duskiess were surreptitiously crossbred with females from nearby Scott's Seaside Sparrow populations, and the breeding was successful. Any student of elementary genetics can figure out that if the remaining male Duskiess had continued to be crossbred with hybrid females, at each generation the offspring would contain proportionately more and more Dusky genes, eventually essentially reconstituting the Dusky subspecies. However, officials of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service apparently are less than skilled in genetics, although quite adept at political stonewalling. They refused to support the proposal for hybrid crossbreeding, arguing that it would destroy the "purity of the race," and even claiming that racial purity was protected under the Endangered Species Act! The few hybrids that were hatched and fledged came to various sad ends, mostly out of neglect.

Walters tells the complicated story of the Dusky with considerable skill. He includes many excerpts from memoranda and letters that were exchanged among the principal players in the tragedy of the Dusky, and he has extensively interviewed virtually all who were involved. Be warned, this is not a case that inspires confidence in the professionalism of some individuals whose salaries

we all pay. I do not advise reading this book around April 15, when you must put that envelope in the mail to the Internal Revenue Service.

Birders do not emerge unscathed in Walters' analysis. He quotes Herb Kale of the Florida Audubon Society, a man who consistently acted as a staunch advocate of the Dusky, and who routinely received numerous telephone calls and letters from birders eager to see the Dusky. That interest abruptly ended when the Dusky was relegated to subspecies status in the 1973 Checklist of North American Birds. Since the Dusky was no longer a tick on the life list, birders could care less. Any political impact birders might have yielded toward saving the Dusky was gone. Think about that, and read this book.

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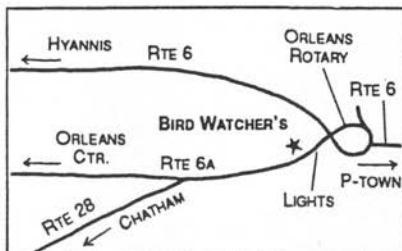
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