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Part 1: Rare birds & state lands, DNR's eye is on the sparrow (and warbler)

By Tim Keyes

The State Wildlife Action Plan focuses on species of high conservation concern in Georgia. Some such as bald eagles and wood storks are relatively easy to detect and monitor and have been addressed through existing programs. Others, including some that occur on state property, are more difficult to detect, and their ranges and densities are much less known.

To help provide answers and guide conservation efforts, the Wildlife Resources Division has been surveying state lands for the past three years, primarily for Bachmans sparrow and Swainsons warbler. These two were picked because the extent of their presence on state lands was not known and they respond well to favorable habitat management practices.

Bachmans sparrow and Swainsons warbler represent polar opposites in terms of habitat. Bachmans sparrows are birds of open, grassy, pine savanna habitat, while Swainsons warblers use dense canebrakes and other thickets in bottomland hardwood forests. Bachmans sparrows are year-round residents, which often begin singing in February and continue through August. This makes them relatively easy to hear if not see. Swainsons warblers are neotropical migrants that are rarely seen on migration. They nest earlier than many other migrants and are best surveyed between mid-April and mid-June. Later in the summer they often become much more quiet. All of these characteristics make them significantly more challenging to find.

For both of these species, we use tapes to call for them along transects through suitable habitat. As you can imagine, this is much easier for Bachmans sparrows than Swainsons warblers. It is the difference between strolling through a grassy upland and bushwhacking through dense thickets around bottomland swamps and sloughs.

Generally, Bachmans sparrows are found in upland pine stands that have been thinned and burned. This produces a dense grassy understory with few shrubs and bushes. Frequent fire removes the dead thatch and keeps bushes and hardwoods from taking over. Areas managed for quail typically provide good habitat for Bachmans sparrow, as well. They can be found in regenerating clearcuts for several years when there is a grassy understory before the pine trees close canopy and shade out the grasses.

State lands surveyed for Bachmans sparrow, and the results:

Region 2

** Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area (confirmed presence 2006 and 2008)

Region 3

** Clarks Hill WMA (many located)
** Di-Lane WMA (many Bachmans sparrows)
** Tuckahoe WMA (several located)
** Yuchi WMA (several Bachmans sparrows)

Region 4

** Black Creek NA (one)
** Fall Line Sandhills Natural Area (Bachmans sparrows located)
** Ocmulgee WMA (one located)
** Rum Creek WMA (Bachmans sparrows located)
** West Point WMA (none located)

Region 5

** Chickasawhatchee WMA (several located)
** Doerun Pitcherplant Bog NA (several located)
** Mayhaw WMA (several located)
** River Creek, the Rolf and Alexandra Kauka WMA (Bachmans sparrows located)
** Silver Lake WMA (Bachmans sparrows located)

Region 6

** Moody Forest NA (limited survey; Bachmans sparrows located)

The most promising sites for Bachmans sparrows are in the Coastal Plain, and include the new Silver Lake WMA and River Creek WMA. Many other sites have potential if ongoing thinning and burning maintain suitable habitat.

The surveys for Swainsons warbler included revisiting sites where they had been surveyed in the past. Several sites, such as Cedar Creek WMA and Beaverdam WMA, saw a decline in numbers as the bottomland hardwoods matured, shading out the cane and other understory plants that provide the dense thickets used for nesting. Younger forest stands, such as those found at River Bend WMA South Tract, still maintain very high densities of Swainsons warbler. Yet, even these sites showed signs of the cane becoming light suppressed, leading to some management to remove the overstory in patches and promote the growth of cane.

State lands surveyed for Swainsons warbler, and the results:

Region 2

** Coopers Creek WMA (one located)
** Tallulah Gorge State Park (several Swainsons warblers located)

Region 3

** Redlands WMA (high numbers of Swainsons warblers)

Region 4

** Big Lazer WMA (none located)
** Cedar Creek WMA (several Swainsons warblers located, but fewer than 10 years ago)
** Joe Kurz WMA (Swainsons warblers located)

** Oaky Woods WMA (many located)
** Ocmulgee WMA (many Swainsons warblers located)
** Panola Mountain State Park (none located)
** Standing Boy Creek State Park (several located)

Region 6

** Beaverdam WMA (several located, but most habitat declining)
** Big Hammock WMA (many Swainsons warblers)
** Bullard Creek WMA (some Swainsons warblers)
** North tract on Bullard Creek (very nice habitat)
** Flat Tub WMA (none located; limited survey)
** Horse Creek WMA (none located)
** Riverbend WMA north (decent numbers of Swainsons warblers)
** Riverbend WMA south (highest numbers, with possible exception of Big Hammock)

Region 7

** Clayhole Swamp WMA (Swainsons warblers located)
** Paulks Pasture WMA (no systematic survey, but records of breeding Swainsons warblers)
** Penholoway Swamp WMA (none located; habitat looks good)
** Sansavilla WMA (none located)

While we haven't visited all state lands, we have focused on those with the most potential based on known habitat types and requirements for the targeted species. These surveys have allowed us to target areas for management that should help maintain or grow populations of these vulnerable species on state lands.

By managing for these species, we also provide habitat for other species, as well. Many birds and other wildlife are dependent on open pine savanna, including brown-headed nuthatch, loggerhead shrike, Southeastern American kestrel, prairie warbler. Other species using dense bottomland thickets include Kentucky warbler, hooded warbler and white-eyed vireo.

Those who helped with the surveys included Linda Guy, Alan Isler, Walter Lane, Chris Bauman, Brandon Anderson, Bill Blackburn, Allison Reid, Brady Matteson, Nathan Klaus and Charlie Muise.

Treasured cove added to northwest Georgia conservation lands

McLemore Cove is many things. Beautiful valley. Biological treasure. Historic site. But one thing McLemore has not been is public property. At least not until October, when the Georgia Department of Natural Resources joined with leaders from the Georgia Land Conservation Program, Walker County, the Open Space Institute Inc. and others to announce the acquisition of 1,839 acres of the cove where Pigeon and Lookout mountains meet.

The $10.5 million acquisition connects with state Transportation Department property to cross the head of the northwest Georgia cove and provide a wildlife and recreation corridor between state-owned Crockford-Pigeon Mountain Wildlife Management Area and Zahnd Natural Area. That's nearly 20,000 contiguous acres in all for conservation.

The DNR and Georgia Land Conservation Program bought 1,544 acres of the McClemore tract. Walker County added 295. The plan is to manage all of the acreage, including the large DOT holdings set aside for mitigation, as one unit.
Formerly part of Mountain Cove Farms, owned by the Yancey family, the property lies within one of the top six acquisition areas targeted by Georgia's Wildlife Action Plan, a blueprint for conservation. The tracts provide habitat for rare species such as the green salamander, barksdale trillium and Georgian cave beetle.
The biological diversity is a result of the sites topography and location at the Pigeon/Lookout Mountain junction and the transition between the Cumberland Plateau and Ridge and Valley physiographic provinces. The flat, sandstone plateau top allows water to seep through cracks and crevices, dissolving the underlying limestone layers, creating miles of underground passages or caves and flowing out at numerous springs around the base of the mountain.

The McLemore Cove tract is within the ecologically important West Chickamauga Creek watershed and contains a variety of habitats, including hardwood and pine dominated forests, sandstone outcrops, caves, springs and open pastureland.
The property also sits within the heart of the Mountain Cove Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places for periods of significance dating from 1825 to 1949. The cove served as a temporary encampment for 15,000 Union troops during the Civil War. Geological history dates the areas historical significance much farther back. Evidence of ocean life can be found on top of the mountains. Artifacts reveal the areas American Indian culture.
The acquisition included nearly $6.5 million from the Georgia Land Conservation Program, $2.15 million from Walker County, $750,000 from a grant from the Open Space Institute, Inc., nearly $270,000 from the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation, $100,000 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and more than $730,000 in state funds.

Red Top Mountain high: Georgia aster found at park

Good news for the Georgia aster (*Symphyotrichum georgianum*), a candidate for the federally threatened list. Several large populations of the rare plant were found in September at Red Top Mountain State Park and on adjacent U.S. Army Corps of Engineers property near Cartersville. The colorful, fall-blooming plant has eye-catching deep purple flowers with white centers.
"I'd never had the chance to see this plant blooming in the wild. It is gorgeous -- no other flower has such a distinguishing deep velvet purple color," said Lisa Kruse, a DNR Wildlife Resources Division botanist.
One of the populations is estimated to have more than 200 stems. The discovery, made by Terrell Stokes of the corps, with help from Janice Granai and Kelvin Richey at Red Top Mountain State Park, means current forest management practices including deer hunting and prescribed fire are working.
The find is the first on record for Georgia aster in Bartow County. The species is recovering steadily at nearby Picketts Mill Historic Site, where prescribed fire has been used to restore open prairie habitat. Georgia asters are found with other significant species that serve as indicators of the uncommon native habitat. Little bluestem, blazing star, tick-trefoil, golden aster and silver plume grass are some examples.

The DNR and the Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance are working to help restore Georgia aster to its native habitat. The discovery of these populations is important because the plants are in their natural habitat on state lands, making them easier to protect and manage for the long term. Georgia aster requires open, grassy meadow habitats, so most remnant populations persist along roadsides or in utility right of ways.

"These occurrences at our state parks will give many other folks the chance to see these beauties," Kruse said.