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New preserve contributes to one of Florida's largest protected tracts

Special to Highlands News-Sun Courtesy Archbold Biological Station

Jun 23, 2021



At DeLuca Preserve, a female Florida Grasshopper Sparrow brings a grasshopper into her nest to feed her nestlings. Each given a unique combination of leg bands for identification.

COURTESY PHOTO/JENNIFER BROWN

VENUS — Nov. 28, 2020, was a conservation milestone for Florida. On this day, Elizabeth DeLuca and family conveyed the 27,000-acre DeLuca Preserve to the University of Florida Foundation, with a conservation easement held by Ducks Unlimited.

Just southwest of Yeehaw Junction, the Preserve protects a vast expanse of managed pastures and citrus as well as extensive dry prairies, innumerable seasonal wetlands and longleaf pine savannas. The Preserve is adjacent to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park to the southwest, which in turn is adjacent to Avon Park Air Force Range on the west side of the Kissimmee River. Just north of these three properties lies Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area.

In total, these properties protect a quarter million acres of native habitats at the center of the historic distribution of dry prairie in Florida.

More properties are being considered for protection, many as private lands with easements, with the potential to eventually create a network of connected and conserved lands of more than 400,000 acres. Some will be working landscapes like the DeLuca Preserve and some managed wildlands, but all support populations of many of Florida's most endangered species.

In 2014, a population of Florida Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*) was found on DeLuca Preserve. This subspecies of the Grasshopper Sparrow is geographically restricted to Florida and resident year-round. Like most grassland birds throughout the U.S., these birds have experienced dramatic population declines. As of 2020, there were fewer than ~100 Florida Grasshopper Sparrows in the wild and about 33% of these occurred on DeLuca Preserve. It is also the only site in which sparrows occupy pastures grazed by cattle.

Since 2017, scientists in Archbold Biological Station's Avian Ecology Program have studied these fascinating sparrows, trying to understand the potential risks and rewards of living on grazed pastures. Virtually all Florida Grasshopper Sparrows on protected public lands occupy native dry prairie where no grazing occurs. But if data from DeLuca suggest that pasture management can be compatible for both Florida Grasshopper Sparrows and cattle, then ranchlands may be essential to the long-term survival of the species.

Virtually all native dry prairie that still exists is already protected, but ranchlands are mosaics of habitat, including managed pastures and native dry prairie, as well as other native habitats. If we can discover the appropriate management to support both FGSPs and profitable cattle

operations, we could greatly expand the area of potential habitat for the FGSPs and coupled with other land protections and conservation strategies, such as recent releases of captive-reared birds, greatly increase their numbers ensuring their long-term persistence.

This vision, to a great extent, depends on developing management plans that will not limit cultural and agricultural uses in working landscapes and maintaining profitable cattle production and thriving FGSP populations. Archbold looks forward to working collaboratively with University of Florida, Ducks Unlimited, and many other partners to see this vision fulfilled.