



Environmental groups suing to get more habitat for endangered seaside sparrow

By Eric Staats

NAPLES — An endangered bird living in South Florida needs more land designated as critical habitat to survive, environmental groups said in a lawsuit filed Thursday.

The lawsuit by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Florida Biodiversity Project seeks an additional 70,000 acres of critical habitat for the Cape Sable seaside sparrow in Everglades National Park and the Big Cypress National Preserve.

Federal officials have said additional critical habitat for the little bird would hinder Everglades restoration.

An estimated 3,000 of the birds — about half of the birds' population in the early 1990s — live in marshes and prairies that are threatened by urban development and by changes in water flows that have altered their habitat.

The lawsuit is part of a larger campaign to undo Bush administration decisions that the groups say ignored science and undermined the Endangered Species Act.

The groups, along with Hollywood, Fla., advocates Brian and Roslyn

Scherf, are asking a federal judge to set aside a 2007 designation of critical habitat and order the Interior Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make a new designation that complies with federal law.

The additional 70,000 acres west of the Shark River Slough are important for the seaside sparrow because the slough acts as a barrier to wildfires, said Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"It provides additional assurances the species won't be driven extinct by one or several catastrophic events," he said Thursday.

Everglades National Park and Fish and Wildlife Service officials could not be reached for comment Thursday afternoon.

Big Cypress preserve spokesman Bob DeGross said preserve officials had not seen the lawsuit and couldn't comment on it.

In 2006, the agency proposed designating 150,000 acres of critical habitat for the seaside sparrow, including the 70,000 acres in two units west of the Shark River Slough, a landscape feature that moves water generally from northeast to the

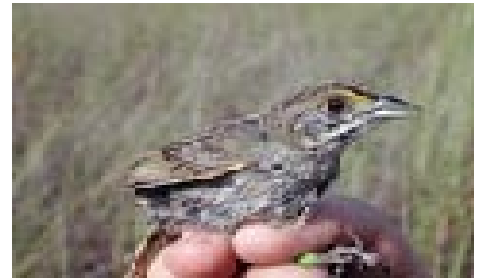


Photo by Lori Oberhofer/National Park Service
Cape Sable seaside sparrow

southwest along the border between Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades National Park.

The final designation, though, dropped the designation west of the slough.

The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians had for years argued that protecting the sparrow's habitat meant keeping it artificially dry and flooding their tribal lands in the Everglades upstream, north of U.S. 41 East.

In a letter to the Fish and Wildlife Service after the decision, seaside sparrow expert Stuart Pimm called it "inept" and said it "tacitly accepts massive damage to nearly a thousand square kilometers of our most important national wetland park and risks the extinction of a federally listed endangered species."