

Southeastern American Kestrels By Ken Meyer and Nathan Klaus

In January 2012, St. Catherines Island hosted the 1st Southeastern American Kestrel Working Group meeting, led by Ken Meyer of Avian Conservation and Research Institute (ACRI).

This meeting was a culmination of a planning project being facilitated by ACRI with a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant to understand the status of and concerns for the SE American Kestrel. Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia state and federal personnel attended to report the status of the birds in their area, and to identify needs that each state has to learn more about the status of these Kestrels and understanding their limiting resources. Coming together as a cooperative working group gives biologists and land managers a better understanding of large-scale needs and resources of this species and their habitats.



Photo by Charlie Muise

The American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) occurs throughout most of North America but is only found in Georgia during the winter. Our year-round resident kestrel, the Southeastern American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius paulus*) is a non-migratory subspecies generally found in open pine savannahs, sandhills, prairies, and pastures in Georgia and the southeastern United States. The SE Kestrel is slightly smaller than the American Kestrel with a mean body mass approximately 22% less for males and 26% less for females.

Southeastern Kestrels numbers have been and continue to decline rather precipitously. It is believed that this is mostly due to the decline in nesting and foraging habitat.

The preferred Sandhill open forestland habitat has mostly given way to agricultural development and residential growth, which also has limited applications of the prescribed fire needed to keep such habitats healthy. Open pastures and powerline corridors seem, in some cases, to be acceptable habitats providing home to grasshoppers, invertebrates, lizards, spiders and insects needed for the Kestrel diets, but often lacks the snags for nesting.

Georgia's Nongame Conservation Section of the DNR has been working to conserve Southeastern American Kestrels along Georgia's Fall Line Sandhills for 6 years. Efforts include a nest box program to provide nest sites and banding of all chicks to get a population estimate and track survival and dispersal. Telemetry studies have also been undertaken to assess habitat use by adult kestrels. Work includes properties owned by the state and the Nature Conservancy, however the majority of work and most of the population of kestrels occurs on numerous private landowners throughout the Fall Line Sandhills.



Banding juvenile kestrels. Nathan Klaus, GA

Our estimates place their numbers at less than 200 pair in Georgia. Complementary research and management in Florida has resulted in an expanded nest-box program that is serving as the primary source of productivity for the SE Kestrel in that state.

There is still much to understand about the SE Kestrels utilization of nesting and foraging habitats. This meeting enabled state and federal managers to engage in, and support each other in determining of the needs of these birds (which varies in individual populations) as a whole, and how to move forward as different organizations (with varying constraints and needs) towards the same goal of increasing SE Kestrel populations. A variety of methods may be used such as land management, artificial nest boxes, and potential translocation and reintroduction.

Mid-Winter Waterbird Count

By Steve Holzman

Seven birders fanned out across the St. Catherines Island beaches for the annual Mid-Winter Shorebird Survey on Saturday January 12, 2012.

This annual survey is conducted along the entire Georgia Coast on the same day during the same 4 hour period (2 hours before and after high tide, where shorebirds are more likely congregated on the smaller sections of beach still exposed) by approximately 50 birders and ornithologists. This survey seeks to discover trends in shorebird populations across the entire Georgia coast. This survey (in its 15th year) has been so successful in getting a winter "snapshot" of shorebird presence in the winter along the Georgia coast, that several other states have begun their own statewide coastal counts. St. Catherines Island birders counted a total of 17,106 shorebirds on Island this year. The entire Georgia coast counted a grand total 95,522 individuals during this years count.

The weather for this years count was beautiful, sunny, and clear. While no rarities were reported for this year (previously on this count we have seen our first California Gull, and usually a few uncommon Long-Billed Curlews) over 11,000 Dunlin presented a great show on the southern tip of the island. Semipalmated Plovers, a species that nests in the far northern provinces of Canada and Alaska were present in good numbers. Birders counted 2700 Semipalmated Plovers this year. Other species rounding out the top 5 (in quantity) were 758 Western Sandpipers, 598 Short-Billed Dowitchers and 595 Black-Bellied Plovers. Species of special concern, such as the American Oystercatcher (9) and Piping Plover (17) were also noted along with a single American Avocet in winter plumage (see photos above and right).



American Avocet in Winter (during count, above) and Breeding plumage (below)



Leucistic Dunlin. Photo by: James Flynn, Jr.

Jim Flynn photographed a leucistic Dunlin. Our friends at Wikipedia tell us that "Leucism (occasionally called leukism) is a general term for the phenotype resulting from defects in pigment cell differentiation and/or migration from the neural crest to skin, hair or feathers during development. This results in either the entire surface (if all pigment cells fail to develop) or patches of body surface (if only a subset are defective) having a lack of cells capable of making pigment." Our birding friends tell us that they just look weird (see photo at left).

Species Profile: Semipalmated Plover.

Breeding Range: Alaska east across Canada to Nova Scotia (see map)

Migration: Through Canada and US.

These birds have been seen swim-

ming short distances across small channels during foraging on migration.

Winter: Coasts of the US, Mexico, Central America, S. America. Perhaps because of its wide range (and accompanying varied habitat) the Semipalmated Plover is one of the few shorebirds in North America whose population is possibly increasing.



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