

2021

## *Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries Habitat Management Project*

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Back barrier dune habitat

Established in 1992, Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, Inc. (DIBS) is a 501 (c) (3), nonprofit corporation, dedicated to preserving the island's stopover habitat for all North American migratory birds. Our organization's objectives are to: 1) Maintain a network of quality stopover habitats. 2) Work with government and other agencies to ensure a balance between human land uses and conservation. 3) Educate landowners about practices that strengthen the island's unique ecosystem. Dauphin Island is designated as a Globally Important Bird Area by Birdlife International and the National Audubon Society ---over 350 species have been documented. Furthermore, Dauphin Island is home to more than 20 eBird hotspots, several of which have more than 1,300 eBird checklists and climbing. In addition, there are now seven eBird hotspots being used by the Audubon Coastal Bird Survey. DIBS is one of the largest property owners on Dauphin Island having acquired over 55 lots (15 acres) on the island since 1992. Many of our properties are under conservation easement with our partner the South Alabama Land Trust (accredited). We are currently prioritizing our efforts toward additional land acquisition purchases on the island. We are partnering with the South Alabama Land Trust (SALT) on a National Fish and Wildlife Fund Gulf Benefit Fund land acquisition grant. We have an 18-member rotating board and some 280 contributing members across Alabama's active birding community.



Scarlet tanager during migration through Dauphin Island habitats.

As one of the few barrier islands in the Gulf of Mexico with wetland habitats and maritime and pine forest, Dauphin Island is unique as a stopover for migratory birds, however, it is also only one of a few of the barrier islands not entirely in public ownership. Our land trust niche contributes to recent larger conservation efforts on Dauphin Island being conducted by other entities including the Town of Dauphin Island and Mobile County who recently acquired 838 acres on the west end of Dauphin Island important to nesting birds and sea turtles and the Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board who protects over 250 acres of beach and maritime forest habitat. Combined this now means that over 50% of the island is in conservation. DIBS role in conservation and management actions is a small but important part of a larger conservation effort on Dauphin Island focusing on tupelo gum swamp and back barrier marsh and dune habitat. In contrast to the larger parcels now in conservation, DIBS works to buy up strategic contiguous properties that were sub-divided over 40 years ago – with little thought to the importance of wetlands and dunes. DIBS has been conserving and managing these habitat types for some 30 years for migratory birds, haphazardly implementing the management strategies suggested for



Gorgas Swamp habitat

this project. Recently we have successfully acquired multiple parcels that need restoration to a manageable condition after almost no management actions over 40 years.

For this grant, there are two focus habitat types, the Tupelo Gum Swamp and the Back Barrier Dune and Marsh habitats. The Alabama Barrier Island Restoration Assessment released in 2020, funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund and conducted by the USGS and USACE, identified these habitat areas as important for conservation and management. These habitats are unique and important on barrier islands for providing specific food sources and refuge required for neotropical migratory birds before and after their migratory journey over the Gulf of Mexico. Established roads have become vectors for invasive species on many of these properties including Cogongrass and Chinese Tallow, which can significantly alter the plant diversity on properties and change the pH of wetlands. With habitat management, it is essential to have a first push to get habitat in good condition, so maintenance is less expensive in the long-term and can more easily be done by dedicated volunteers. The Cornell funds will assist in this first effort required to get these old and new properties in good condition as a food source and refuge for migratory birds and to help DIBS manage these lands more easily in perpetuity ensuring more resilient landscapes to storms and climatic changes.