

# Notes on Bachman's Sparrow in the Croatan National Forest

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During parts of April and May 1987, I obtained information on Bachman's Sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis bachmani*) in the Croatan National Forest, Carteret County, North Carolina. The area of investigation is known as the Millis Road Savanna, and is located approximately half way between Morehead City and Swansboro, and is about five miles from the Atlantic coast.

## HABITAT

Bachman's Sparrow habitat at this station is an open, park-like, mature Longleaf Pine-Wiregrass (*Pinus palustris-Aristida stricta*) savanna (Fig. 1) of about 200 acres, somewhat divided into blocks or compartments by comparatively narrow bands of Pocosins (evergreen shrub-bogs) with a scattering of Pond Pines (*Pinus serotina*).

The Millis Road savanna is of special interest as it apparently is the northernmost extensive habitat of this type along the Atlantic Coastal Plain; and as John O. Fussell states in *Finding Birds in Carteret County* (1985), is the northeasternmost site where the sparrow occurs regularly. As Fussell also points out in his book; "This type of habitat once stretched over vast areas of the Southeast, but is now becoming rare because of modern forestry prac-



Fig. 1 Longleaf Pine-Wiregrass savanna habitat of Bachman's Sparrow in the Croatan National Forest, Carteret County, North Carolina.

tices." During the breeding season of 1987, I located 15 territorial male Bachman's Sparrows in the 200-acre savanna.

The Longleaf Pine-Wiregrass savanna is the classic habitat of breeding Bachman's Sparrows. Although some of these birds occasionally occur elsewhere; in grassy fields with a scattering of shrubs, fields with brush piles following a clear-cut timber harvest, or in young pine plantations, particularly in the more northern part of the range; such secondary habitats are usually in a successional stage and Bachman's Sparrow populations would be temporary or present for only a few years.

The Longleaf Pine forest is a subclimax or fire-climax type, and is maintained as such at Millis Road by prescribed or controlled burning about every three years. Prescribed burning reduces the danger of wildfire and enhances desirable vegetation. The area in the Croatan National Forest is burned in late winter, well before the breeding season of Bachman's Sparrow and other ground nesters. John Fussell informs me that Bachman's Sparrows have been at the Millis Road Savanna each year during the breeding season since he began visiting the area in 1974.

In this open, park-like habitat at Millis Road, the tallest pines are 70-80 feet in height, and 70-90 years old. In addition to the predominantly Wiregrass ground cover beneath the pines, there are small woody shrubs and a variety of herbaceous plants scattered through the savanna. Most of the shrubs are dwarfed or stunted due to the fire. Among the most abundant are several species of Blueberry (*Vaccinium* spp.), Dwarf Wax Myrtle (*Myrica cerifera* var. *pumila*), Gallberry (*Ilex glabra*), and Swamp Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) saplings.

#### NESTING

I located a nest of four eggs on 21 May 1987. The nest was placed under a tussock of Wiregrass next to a small clump of Blueberry plants and 15 inches from a Swamp Magnolia sapling. The nest was arched over, and the opening faced east.

On that date, I made observations in the area of the nest, and between 10:00 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. EST, the female left the nest to feed three times, and remained away from the nest for about 10 minutes each time. She fed an average of 55 feet away from the nest.

The following day, between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. EST, the eggs hatched. Following the hatching of the eggs, there was no indication that the young were fed that day. The next day (23 May), I noted that the young were fed four times between 8:00 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. EST, three times by the female and once by the male. My observations at the nest were terminated in the early afternoon.

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