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Subject: Questions about fox squirrels in Hernando County
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Capt. Koka,

It was good talking with you today about your concerns regarding potential take of fox squirrels on a site in Spring Hill, Hernando County.

I've attached here a number of rules from the Florida Administrative Code (FAC). State and federally listed species are listed in rule 68A-27.003 and also the attached PDF version of that list. The other attached FAC rules describe protections for non-listed species.

- Permits are required for the intentional or incidental take of listed species (68A-27.007).

The species of fox squirrel that occurs in Hernando County is called the Southern fox squirrel (SFSQ; *Sciurus niger*). The SFSQ is not a listed species in Florida. However this species does have protections described in rule 68A-29.002.

- Note: For species that are not listed, the term "take" means: "The term shall include taking, attempting to take, pursuing, hunting, molesting, capturing, or killing any wildlife or freshwater fish, or their nests or eggs by any means whether or not such actions result in obtaining possession of such wildlife or freshwater fish or their nests or eggs."

- For non-listed species, steps should be taken to avoid the unpermitted take of individual animals or their eggs, young, or nests.

State and federally listed species that might occur in the Spring Hill area of Hernando County include these species: Southeastern American kestrel, Indigo snake, short-tailed snake, Florida pine snake, gopher tortoise,

Non-listed species that might occur in that area include these species: Southern fox squirrel, Florida mouse, a number of migratory birds (most native birds are classified as migratory birds – see rule 68A-16.003), gopher frog,

I hope this information helps you.

Terry

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American kestrels often perch on telephone wires at the edge of a field or other open area. From this vantage they hunt for insects (especially grass-hoppers and dragonflies), lizards and small mammals. Sometimes they are seen hovering like helicopters above their prey.

Kestrels nest between mid-March and early June, raising about four chicks during a season. However, kestrels are short-lived birds. For those surviving their first winter, life span averages between 2.3 - 2.8 years

The southeastern American kestrel has undergone a marked population decline and a contraction in its range in recent decades. It is currently listed as threatened in the state of Florida. Once widely distributed throughout 7 southeastern states, the southeastern American kestrel occurs today primarily in Florida, the coastal plain of South Carolina, and the Mississippi Gulf coast. It is patchily distributed elsewhere in small, fragmented populations.

Loss of nesting snags, especially longleaf pine, appears to be the main reason for the decline. In addition, since kestrels avoid pine plantations and hardwood stands, the loss of open foraging habitat has been a contributing factor.

During feeding, the Southeastern American kestrel will use a perch to locate and observe its prey, then fly in and catch the prey with its feet. The diet of the Southeastern American kestrel primarily consists of grasshoppers and lizards, but they will also eat spiders and frogs.

Breeding begins in March and concludes in June. Females will lay three to five eggs on average in one breeding season. Eggs are white and reddish-brown, with dark speckles. Incubation takes one month and the chicks require another 30 days before they are capable of leaving the nest.

The Southeastern American kestrel has a low life expectancy in the wild, only averaging 15 months. The survival rate of its first year of life can be as low as 30%, while the rate increases to 50% after the first year. Increased predation and collisions with motor vehicles are some of the reasons for the low survival rates for the subspecies. Unlike the kestrels that breed in the rest of North America, the Southeastern American kestrel is a non-migratory subspecies. It lives year-round in Florida and is fairly sedentary, with short dispersal distances.

Threats

The main threat to the Southeastern American kestrel is the loss of nesting and feeding habitat. These habitats are destroyed during the development of new residential areas and farm lands, removal of trees in agriculture fields, and the alteration of fire-maintained pine habitats by suppressing fire. Kestrels are also vulnerable to pollutants such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), and heavy metals. Other potential threats include increased predation, collisions with vehicles and aircraft, and the West Nile Virus (Bird 2009, Deem et al. 1998, Smallwood and Bird 2002).