

ABUNDANCE OF APPARENT AVIAN DUSTING BEDS ON ALVAR GRASSLANDS

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In the Western portion of Jefferson County are some rare grassland communities. "Alvar" is a Swedish term describing barrens and grassland vegetation that grows on thin soils over level outcrops of limestone bedrock. These areas are very wet in early spring but very dry in summer, resulting in many rare plants and communities. There is also an abundance of what appear to be avian dusting beds. Dusting beds are uncommon and we usually associate them with the House Sparrow and the gallinaceous species such as grouse and turkey. The most dusting sites are at The Henderson Shores Unique Area, a New York State land and the Limerick Cedars Preserve, a Nature Conservancy preserve. A few have been seen at Chaumont Barrens, another Conservancy preserve.

These dusting sites seem to be used annually and are even recognizable in the fall, when use has ceased, and in the spring before the summer residents return. They are found in fairly open situations, usually with very shallow or no soil, but organic detritus from dried algal mats which form on the bare limestone. Sometimes an old roadway through the area is used for this activity. In most instances the locations provide good visibility in all directions. In some locations multiple beds are found in clumped configurations. Most of the dusting sites are fairly open with few or no shrubs nearby. They are usually found more in the centers of the open area and, in time with practice, can be recognized. Although I have not yet seen any few birds in the act of using these dusting beds, I suspect the following species use them on a regular basis: Northern Flicker, Brown Thrasher, Eastern Towhee, Field Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Mourning Dove, American Robin and Ruffed Grouse. It is not unusual to see in a day afield on one of these areas as many as seven or eight different dusting "stations." The later into the summer months and in the occasional very dry weather periods, additional or as I call them "temporary" dusting areas develop on these sites. These temporary dusting beds may or may not be at the same locations as in past years under the same conditions as I have never fully kept track of these temporary stations for any length of time. Based on my experience, these sites get used very often and must serve an important role for the birds of these areas. These beds are not made by mammals as I have found

unidentified bird tracks and feathers.

The role of the dusting act itself is not fully understood (Terres 1980) although it is known to provide a method of removing oil from the feathers and a way of realigning feather shafts (Ehrlich and others 1988). An excellent study would be to monitor some of these sites from a blind with a video camera setup to record the use and bird behavior on the beds and if competition or antagonism occurs in their use.

I would appreciate any information or comments on these dusting beds from other birders who have seen this type of activity, whether at rare communities or not. Please share your comments with others by submitting them to *The Kingbird*.

LITERATURE CITED

- Terres JK. 1980. Dust bathing. In: *Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. NY, Knopf, p 59.
- Ehrlich PR, Dobkin DS, Wheye D. 1988. Bathing and dusting. In: *The Birder's Handbook*. NY, Simon & Schuster, p 429.

