



EXCURSION

A chirp off the old block

'Out-of-the-blue' inspiration leads to the creation of nature lover's paradise in Lake County.

STORY: ROXANNE BROWNL X PHOTOS: ANTHONY RAO



Bruce and Cathy Brown

There is a hidden gem for nature lovers in south Lake County. Attractions include walking trails highlighted with thousands of native plants, picnic areas, a serene lake to sit and relax by, camps, workshops, educational programming, and countless opportunities to watch the wonder of nature unfold before your very eyes.

All that is part of the Florida Scrub-Jay Trail and the 130 species of birds, 239 species of native plants and about 60 species of butterflies that live there.

"This is a mecca for nature photographers, and we also have people who like coming down to have picnics with their families; it's nice to see," says Bruce Brown, who with his wife Cathy Brown, founded the venue more than 18 years ago, after both had left their television broadcasting careers for a slower-paced lifestyle.

Their vision was opening B.B. Brown's Gardens, an idea that came to fruition after purchasing a cabin from the Rosewood movie set shot near Deland; they moved to 15-acres of land with a lake and multiple ecosystems in Clermont, an area they had fallen in love with seeing.

In clearing what was left of the orange groves that once flourished on that property, the Browns discovered a type of bird they'd never seen before.

Little did they know that the bird - a Florida scrub jay - would end up changing the direction of their lives forever.

"I've always loved birds and I was fascinated by that little blue bird we found in the back, so we researched it and found out that it was a Florida scrub jay found nowhere in the world but here and we're going, 'Oh my gosh, we have to do something to protect this bird,'" Cathy says. "In the meantime, we really couldn't do much because our mission and focus was on the brand new business for us with the gardens and all, but that little bird remained in the back of our minds."

Fast forward a few years after planting thousands of native plants and creating a trail system, to a partnership with the National Wildlife Federation to run its Habitat Stewards program, a venture that involved building habitats around the community. Then, they founded the National Florida Scrub Jay Consortium, a not-for-profit organization focused on creating a sanctuary for the endemic bird species and more.

They went on to create a scenic trailhead on the property, and in 2003, the Florida Scrub-Jay Trail was opened to the public.

"The gardens are very important to us, but the majority of our time



POINTS OF INTEREST

- 1 HARBOR AREA
- 2 TRAIL HOUSE
- 3 INFORMATION KIOSK
- 4 GREAT TORTOISE HILLTOP GARDEN
- 5 COVINGS PINE AREA
- 6 PINEY POND TRAIL
- 7 ENTRANCE GATE
- 8 JAYBEL LAKE TRAIL
- 9 LANSING FOREST
- 10 WINDY HOLLOW
- 11 FLAG POOL GARDEN
- 12 INFORMATION CENTER



The Florida Scrub-Jay

TRAIL FACTS: 130 Bird Species • 239 Native Plant Species • 59 Butterfly Species
Trail Length = 1 Mile (West Trail + East Trail Perimeter)



“THIS IS A MECCA FOR NATURE PHOTOGRAPHERS.” — BRUCE BROWN

is spent on volunteering for the scrub jay, for the habitat, and for educating and getting people outdoors for that mission,” Cathy says.

Today, visitors can stop in for free tours of the Scrub-Jay Trail and as explained in a brochure: “Scouts, church groups and a variety of clubs and service organizations work side-by-side with one common cause – to save the Florida scrub jay from extinction.”

But it’s not just scrub jays that have benefitted. After the land restoration, gopher tortoises began showing up and the trail is now home to the largest population of the endangered animal species in all of Florida.

“That’s the beauty of of restoration. They made this habitat and all these gopher tortoises just came,” says Dr. Marc Minno, a scientist and butterfly expert who leads annual and monthly “Bio Blitz” programs at the venue.

The Browns also host colleges from all over the world who send teams of students down to study their habitats, animal and plant species.

“From what we understand, we have one of the largest pygmy fringe trees anybody has ever seen, which is really fascinating,” Cathy says.

The Browns and Dr. Minno have also developed an internship program where any college student can spend time learning everything there is to know about

butterflies alongside them. And after 16 years partnering with the Browns, Dr. Minno has discovered many new species of butterflies and plants.

“I always looked at this as if it were a research project, but one where I get to interact with people and where I help people learn about butterflies,” says Dr. Minno. “You never know what’s going to show up, even in your own back yard. I love that.”

The Browns also partner with Audubon for an annual Jay Watch program that involves monitoring the scrub jays and taking scrub jay counts across the state of Florida. They were also hand-picked by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to lead annual fish camps that teach kids about aquatic life, and sustaining environments that support various species of plants and animals.

Tara Ingram, a Lake County teacher and the trail’s education program director helps with the camp and is also working with Bruce and Cathy on developing other year-round programs.

“Having that connection with nature is really important for people, especially for kids, and there’s no better way to do it than getting them outside, away from the four walls at home or school and off their phones and other things,” Tara says.

For Bruce and Cathy, the journey they’ve been on over the course of 25 years has led to much more than they ever expected.

“We have everything from the young kids getting out and enjoying life to them learning all about science and some of the students who have come here to study have gone on to careers in related fields,” Cathy says. “It’s very satisfying.”

For Bruce, hosting scouting programs and camps is especially rewarding since it was one of his father’s passions, but overall, both Browns feel grateful for the little bird they came across and what that encounter grew into.

“It’s such a transition from the work that we used to do 25 years ago. We knew it was a time to do something different, but now I see this has turned out to be the best possible alternative,” Bruce says. “I didn’t realize it at the time, because I thought ‘Plants? Gardens? Ewe.’ but then, as we gradually got into it, I started realizing it was a dream come true and today I just absolutely love it here. It’s a paradise.” @

**IF
YOU
GO**

**FLORIDA SCRUB-JAY TRAIL/
B.B. BROWN'S GARDENS**

11490 Montevista Road, Clermont

For hours and other information,
visit scrubjaytrail.org
or call 352.429.5566.

Follow @Scrub-Jay Trail on Facebook.

Know of a cool local attraction you'd like us to feature?

→ Contact us at least three months in advance and provide all the details to roxanne@akersmediagroup.com.



ROXANNE BROWN