

THE NEWS LEADER



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DAY TRIPS AND TRAVEL ADVENTURES

Former TV writers transform dead orange grove into wildlife preserve



ALL PHOTOS BY JACK CASTLE/CORRESPONDENT
The sign at the entrance to the wildlife preserve on Monte Vista Road is colorful and inviting.

By JACK CASTLE
Correspondent

"Twenty-eight years ago, B.B. Gardens was little more than 15 acres of dead orange trees," said Cathy Brown. Then a miracle occurred. "We spotted our first pair of Scrub-Jays near Flag Lake, and it changed our lives forever."

Now Cathy Brown and her husband Bruce own and operate B.B. Gardens, a sanctuary they began to help save the Florida Scrub-Jay from extinction.

Former writers, directors, and producers for a variety of television shows and Disney productions, the Browns were driving around Florida looking for a place to open a nursery when they spotted their first Scrub-Jay.

The couple did their research and soon found these friendly little, blue-colored birds were in serious trouble.

"We just knew we needed to do something to save them," said Bruce Brown, for whom the gardens are named.

At great cost to themselves, they bought the dead orange grove and carved a road through it. Next, they knew they needed a base of operations. Using their connections with the movie business, they purchased a genuine looking "Cracker House" replica; cracker houses were homes built by early Florida settlers.

The replica came from the movie set of "Rosewood" — a 1997 movie based on a true story about a lynch mob storming a peaceful African American town in 1923.

WELCOME TO B.B. GARDENS/FLORIDA SCRUB-JAY TRAIL

For nearly three decades, the Browns, with help from



Bruce and Cathy Brown greet visitors (and don't worry, the dog likes when company comes to call).

many volunteers and several grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department, have been carefully creating habitats for the endangered Scrub-Jay, along with many other species such as bluejays, hummingbirds, and even rare butterflies.

Now, nearly these 30 years later, the sea of dead orange groves has been transformed into a vibrant nature preserve, one with sandy-soil trails and dozens of carefully crafted habitats.

TOURING THE SITE

Spread out over the property, are over 130 species of birds, 98 active gopher turtles, and acres of exotic-looking plant species.

The cracker house, a simple wood-framed structure with a deep-shade porch, now coexists with the lush green vegetation surrounding it. Nearby, miniature Sicilian donkeys (shipped all the way from Italy) frolic in a wide-open pen and serve as therapy animals.

Cathy often gives tours of the grounds. Her enthusiasm for creating habitats and saving wildlife and plant species is infectious, and her first-hand knowledge of Scrub-Jays is unparalleled.

She recommends visitors take a guided tour, as otherwise it is easy to miss everything "hidden in plain sight," such as a praying mantis stalking a rare zebra swallowtail butterfly, or the Dwarf Pawpaw bush, which is a small deciduous tree that's been around since the days of the dinosaurs.

The property is also peppered with dozens of impressive Eagle Scout projects; wood benches, camping cabins, even an observation tower that overlooks Lake Flag, not on any map.

There's also a summer camp for kids.

"We give a grass roots introduction to fishing, teaching kids how to safely handle the fishing boat, even emergency preparedness," said Dean Morris, who runs the fishing portion of the summer camp. "It's a great way to get kids off the video games and outside in nature."

WHAT A TOUR CAN BE LIKE

Back on the trail, the real highlight is the amazing little, blue-colored birds that seem to magically appear. Visitors from all over the world come here for a glimpse of the Florida Scrub-Jay. These unique birds can't be found anywhere else on the planet and have lived in Florida as a distinct species for more than 2 million years.

Feasting one's eyes on these highly inquisitive and intelligent blue colored birds is the ultimate experience for bird lovers, and it's not difficult to do, because these remarkable little birds often land on a branch nearby then sing a merry little tune.

Be forewarned, though. These friendly birds have a tendency to fly straight at a person's face and land right on a person's head; they seem to absolutely adore anyone wearing a hat.

A THREATENED SPECIES

The Browns are not only trying to save the local Scrub-Jays but get everyone involved and save them all over the state. According to the Fish and Wildlife Federation there are only 7,700-9,300 Scrub-Jays left. They are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and other organizations.

WANT TO VISIT?

BB Brown's Gardens Florida Scrub-Jay Trail is located at 11490 Monte Vista Road in Clermont.

Admission is free. However, to protect and preserve the delicate balance, no dogs are allowed.

Summer schedule:

B.B. Gardens will be closed until July 11. When it reopens the schedule will be:

8 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays only, from July 11-Sept. 9

Also available are:

A free orientation is offered on the first Saturday of each month, from 8-11 a.m.

The fourth Saturday of each month from 8-11 a.m., The Florida Scrub-Jay Trailblazers clear the way through another section of the trail.

Dr. Marc Minno's monthly BioBlitz nature walks and butterfly surveys take place the second Saturday of ev-

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photo: Natalie Roberts

ery month, from 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

TO LEARN MORE

The Florida Scrub-Jay Consortium is a non-profit organization designed to increase the awareness of the need to preserve this important species from extinction and restore the natural habitat for the Scrub-Jay, gopher tortoise and native plant species.

Also, when the Browns aren't taking care of Scrub-Jays and the other species, they also specialize in designing habitats for homeowners. These can be crafted on huge acre plots or on a small area in backyards.

To learn more: info@scrubjaytrail.org or call 352-429-5566.



A Florida Scrub-Jay perches upon Bruce Brown's finger.



This cracker house replica, built for a movie, now is part of the landscape at the preserve.