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## A haven for the rare Scrub-Jay thrives in Lake



PHOTOS BY JACOB LANGSTON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER (ABOVE, BELOW); STAFF FILE PHOTO (TOP)

Cathy and Bruce Brown, of B.B. Brown's Gardens, lead a tour of the property Tuesday. They created a state-wide nonprofit, the Florida Scrub-Jay Trail, after encountering the rare species, shown above, 20 years ago.

## Couple creates sanctuary for birds, avian fans

**BY KATE SANTICH**  
Staff Writer

At the end of a dirt road in an abandoned Lake County orange grove — a place most people would consider the middle of nowhere — Cathy and Bruce Brown found their piece of paradise.

Here the former TV-production executives ditched their big-paycheck jobs and sank their life savings into 15 acres.

At first, the couple envisioned a flourishing nursery with a Southern Living-style cottage garden among the longleaf pines



A Zebra Swallowtail butterfly takes a nip of nectar from a Giant Ironweed flower at the Browns' gardens.

and scattered oaks. They would call it B.B. Brown's Gardens — for Bruce Barry Brown — and they figured it would fund their retirement.

Then, among the dying citrus trees, they spotted a striking sky-blue bird they couldn't identify.

It turned out to be a rare Florida Scrub-Jay — a species found nowhere else in the world but the state's midsection and typically only in the squatty, sandy habitat known as scrub. Gregarious and inquisitive, the species is thousands of years old, but in

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# HAVEN

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recent years its territory has been devoured by agriculture and subdivisions, killing off 90 percent of the population. No more than 4,000 are left.

"The good news is that it was making its home in the old orange groves," Cathy Brown says now. "The bad news was that it might not survive there."

So the man who had once run an Orlando production studio for Disney and the woman who'd managed a sales department there set about to help save the birds.

That was 20 years ago.

"If you had told me when I moved to Florida that this was what I would end up doing, I would have said, 'No way,'" Cathy says. "I was going to have a home in Europe and a home out West and a home here, and I was going to be traveling around to all the beaches of the world, and I never, ever would have imagined this in my wildest dreams."

It was the spring of 1997, one year after they opened the garden center, when they discovered the Scrub-Jay — a nesting pair that produced five fledglings. Immediately, they began consulting with habitat experts to establish the vegetation and environment preferred by the birds, and with a grant from the National Wildlife Federation, they launched the Florida Scrub-Jay Trail Head in April 2003.

In truth, it's not so much a trail as it is a series of scattered segments of land, from Jupiter to Sarasota to Merritt Island, where the bird has been found.

Two years later, the couple also formed the nonprofit Florida Scrub-Jay Consortium to unite the private property owners working to save the birds on their land.

But none of that pays the bills.

Along Monte Vista Road, south of State Road 50, you can see the couple's fading B.B. Brown's Gardens sign, though given the still-light traffic in this part of the county, most visitors are brought by word of mouth, and most don't come to spend money. Instead, they are birders, tourists, Scout groups, school kids and artists searching for tranquility, native plants, exotic butterflies and maybe a glimpse of the rare Scrub-Jay.

Cathy, now 60, and Bruce, 75, are there most Saturdays through Wednesdays, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. They spend the other two days doing landscape design and consultation. They are outdoors nearly all



JACOB LANGSTON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Cathy Brown, owner of B.B. Brown's Gardens, gives a tour of the property Tuesday. She and her husband, Bruce, started the Florida Scrub-Jay Trail.

their waking hours, which is how they like it.

On a recent morning, the temperature already has climbed north of 90 when the couple set out to give an impromptu tour. Bruce summons Charlie Brown, a 2-year-old shepherd-boxer mix, and the three head off into the scrub terrain they have created over years of tedious planting, hand-watering, trimming and nurturing — with the aid of hundreds of volunteers.

They know each plant, tree, bug, bird, critter and spore in their neck of the woods — including the location of each burrow for their 95 gopher tortoises, a protected species. They know when things bloom, how they mate, what they eat and whether they sting, bite, chirp or prey upon their neighbors.

"This is a purple firespike. This is awesome," Cathy says, stroking the tubular flower. "The hummingbirds love it."

The couple became habitat stewards under the wildlife federation's Garden for Wildlife initiative, eventually training more than 100 volunteers to create gardens that provide native species with food, water, cover and a place to raise their young.

"I'm trying to figure out how to clone them," says the initiative's director, Mary Phillips, of the couple. Now, the children the Browns taught in the beginning are old enough to have children of their own.

"They were a really big part of my childhood," says Sarah Morningstar of Clermont, a 19-year-old biomedical major at the University of North Florida. "I was in the fourth grade when I first visited — so maybe 8 or 9 years old — and I went with my younger brother, who was a Scout, and a

Scrub-Jay actually landed on me. ... I feel like a lot of my love of nature comes from them."

The couple gave her a birding manual and made her the youngest trail docent for their first-Saturday-of-the-month orientation tours, which they still hold. They also have a work day, every fourth Saturday, to help maintain the property.

Dozens of Eagle Scouts have done projects on the site. International birders have visited. Academics have studied and surveyed it. And the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service helped pay for an irrigation system.

"Cathy and Bruce work so tirelessly for the cause and educating people and trying to get kids interested that you just feel like you want to give them a hand," says Sandra Groeneveld, an artist who lives in Lake County's Montverde with her husband. She volunteered at least once a month for years, pulling weeds and cutting brush, until she turned her focus to running the Florida Scrub-Jay Trail website ([scrubjaytrail.org](http://scrubjaytrail.org)). She still goes when she needs a dose of inspiration, though seeing the birds themselves is not guaranteed.

"I think, being a nature-lover, that's what I find beautiful," she says. "You can't go there and expect the birds to be on a schedule. It's not a show; it's nature in front of you."

That first pair of Scrub-Jays has passed now, but the next generation and its young remain. There is only a handful at any one time. The birds like a large amount of territory, and they're finicky.

The scrub cannot become overgrown, or they will abandon it.

So the Browns can count their Scrub-Jay residents as a small but

significant victory, helping to stave off extinction. But the work is hard, and they're not as young as they once were. They have put the 15 acres in a private trust and are searching for grants to buy more territory around them, hoping to create a nature camp for families.

"First of all, this property has to be locked in, never to be developed, always to be exactly what it is right now," Bruce says. "And I would just like for us to be remembered as the people who started this — not a big ta-da or anything, but just so people know where it came from."

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