

# TRAVEL & ARTS



A Florida scrub-jay is perched next to a trail in Blue Spring State Park on June 17. PATRICK CONNOLLY/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTOS

## WINGED WONDER

Florida scrub-jay is smart, social, endangered and only found in the Sunshine State



**Patrick Connolly**  
*Central Florida Explorer*

**T**ake a stroll through one of the remaining pockets of Florida scrub habitat and listen for a loud, scratchy weep — a sound that distinguishes the Florida scrub-jay from other avian residents of the Sunshine State.

That raspy call is likely emitted by a bird with a blue head and wings, an appearance that closely resembles a blue jay but the scrub-jay is much more distinct in its habits.

Florida scrub-jays are cooperative breeders, meaning they exist in family units that can involve multiple generations of birds. One individual can act as a sentinel, watching out for hawks and other predators while others forage or watch the nest.

These birds are also forward-thinking and exhibit excellent spatial awareness, burying caches of acorns for wintertime when food can become scarce. A single scrub-jay can bury up to 8,000 acorns in one year.

### The scrub scene

As one of the state's endemic birds, found only on the Florida peninsula, the Florida scrub-jay is smart, social and resilient but is endangered due to habitat loss and other threats.

"The scrub is a rare habitat. A lot of what you can find in the scrub, you can't find anywhere else in the world," said Audrey DeRose-Wilson, director of bird

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Sandy trails take hikers through scrub habitat within the Lyonia Preserve in Volusia County. Florida scrub-jays inhabit this preserve, which is surrounded by development.

## Connolly

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conservation for Audubon Florida. “The scrub-jay is kind of a habitat indicator species. If the jays are doing well, then we’re confident that the scrub habitat is also suitable for other scrub-endemic species.”

Scrub habitat is hot, dry and almost desert-like, characterized by short oak trees, low shrubs and patches of bare sand. Though the landscape might seem hospitable, this environment is also home to gopher tortoises, the rare eastern indigo snake, scrub lizards and insects.

## Losing ground

A lot of this “high and dry” habitat has also become sought after for development away from flood-prone areas of the state.

“The scrub-jay population is declining; there’s just about 10 percent of the population size left compared to what it was 200 years ago. A lot of the oak ecosystem, which the scrub-jays and other species require, has been lost,” DeRose-Wilson said. “A lot of the upland, rolling, dry, scrub habitat is really good for citrus and other kinds of agriculture. It’s also really good for people building houses.”

Scrub jays once numbered around 40,000, per one population estimate in the late 1800s. Now, there may only be about 8,000 Florida scrub-jays left, concentrated in Ocala National Forest, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Lake Wales Ridge and other clusters of Central Florida. Though some birds have adapted to find suitable

habitat as they’ve been forced out of their original homes, these jays don’t typically travel more than a few miles from where they’re born.

## Doing their part

When pockets of separated scrub are all that’s left of the scrub-jay’s habitat, it becomes less likely their population can thrive, especially when lacking genetic diversity. This is where state land managers and private landowners are stepping in to do their part.

Set on the rolling hills of Lake County near Clermont, Cathy and Bruce Brown have spent more than two decades perfecting their piece of Florida paradise following their retirement from the TV industry. But along the way, they’ve found a deeper mission.

“A year after opening up our nursery, BB Brown’s Gardens, we found the Florida scrub-jay on the property. We researched and found out that it was rare and unique to find them in this environment,” Cathy Brown said of the land that was formerly used as a citrus grove. “They’re being pushed out of their typical scrub habitat due to development.”

The couple has opened their land and scrub-jay trail to public visitors, summer camps and researchers hoping to learn more about this unique bird. On their 15 acres, they have one family of scrub-jays, nearly 100 gopher tortoises and more than 130 species of birds that have been spotted.

The Browns founded the Florida Scrub-Jay Consortium to help inform other private land owners of ways to help the Florida



An adult scrub-jay perches on a cup at Cathy and Bruce Brown’s Florida Scrub-Jay Trail. **TOM BENITEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL**



Bruce and Cathy Brown sit outside in B.B. Brown’s Gardens, which is home to the Florida scrub-jay trail and a small patch of scrub habitat. The property is also used for summer camps, public education and research. **PATRICK CONNOLLY/ORLANDO SENTINEL**

scrub-jay: planting scrub oak trees or bird-friendly berries, avoiding pesticides

and keeping cats indoors. “If there’s a scrub-jay within a certain amount of

miles of your property, they might be coming through,” Cathy Brown said.

Part of conservation success may also hinge on people having the chance to interact with Florida scrub-jays. In addition to visiting the Clermont trail, Audubon Florida holds Jay Watch events with volunteer bird surveyors and Blue Spring State Park hosts ranger-led hikes about once per month.

“You can have an opportunity to see these beautiful, fascinating, social birds in their habitat, which delights and captivates people,” DeRose-Wilson said. “A lot of people come out of that experience understanding what the scrub-jays need. They’re more invested in ensuring that scrub-jays have circumstances that allow them to persist, and they can advocate for that.”

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