

The Florida Scrub-Jay



suburban
habitat

Threats

The greatest threat to scrub-jay populations is habitat loss due to residential, commercial, and agricultural development. Many isolated populations have been eliminated, and others have been irreparably fragmented by urban development. Preservation of existing populations is of paramount importance, as is habitat management within designated sanctuaries. In natural areas and preserves, prescribed burning is the most critical element in the preservation of scrub habitat.

Where residential areas overlap into scrub-jay territories, the jays have been found to be very tolerant of human presence. In order to accommodate the jays, landowners can provide islands of scrub oaks in their landscape. Also, mowed areas mirror natural openings in scrub habitat. It is also important for pet owners to keep cats and dogs indoors.



feral
house
cat



How you can help

Provide habitat for scrub-jays. Plant, protect, and cultivate patches of sand live oak, myrtle oak, and Chapman's oak on your property. Your local Cooperative Extension Service can recommend other appropriate scrub plants to suit your landscaping needs.

Protect scrub-jays from your pets. Enforce leash laws in your community, and protect areas being used by nesting scrub-jays from domestic animals, especially cats.

Restrict the use of pesticides. Scrub-jays feed on insects usually considered pests around golf courses and homes. Pesticides may limit or contaminate food used by the jays. Reduce the use of pesticides as much as possible.

Report malicious destruction or harassment of scrub-jays or their nests. Call Wildlife Alert toll-free: 1-888-404-3922.

Support the establishment of regional and local scrub-jay preserves. Protection of scrub-jay populations on managed tracts of optimal habitat is the best means of protecting this species. Sarasota County is working to preserve and maintain scrub habitat through the establishment of a countywide Habitat Conservation Plan.



For more information please contact:
Sarasota County Public Works
Permitting, Mitigation & Restoration
941.861.0925

Protection

The Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*) was listed as a Threatened Species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 1987 and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 1975. If you are planning to build on land with scrub habitat, contact these agencies to avoid possible impacts to scrub-jays. It is unlawful to possess, harass, kill, or collect this species or its nest and eggs.

Natural History

Scrub-jay pairs mate for life. They also raise their young in cooperative family groups, a fascinating aspect of scrub-jay family life. The family group consists of a breeding pair and their offspring, which act as helpers. Helpers assist in defending the breeding territory, nest, and young. However, only the breeding pair, never the helpers, participate in nest-building, incubating, and brooding activities. This takes place from late February through the end of June. Long-term studies have established that breeding pairs with helpers successfully raise more young than do lone pairs.

Scrub-jays are nonmigratory birds, and therefore each family maintains a permanent territory ranging from 5 to 50 acres (averaging about 25 acres). Territories increase in size as the family group grows and when the habitat is less than optimal. Scrub-jays will defend their territory from adjacent families and predators, including house cats.

Scrub-jays eat a variety of animals and plants. Insects comprise a major food source during spring and summer. They may also prey on frogs, toads, lizards, snakes, birds' eggs, and even mice. In addition, each scrub-jay harvests and buries 6,000 to 8,000 acorns from August to November for use throughout the year. Scrub-jays will also readily accept handouts such as corn, peanuts, and sunflower seeds.



fire-maintained scrub

Habitat

Scrub-jays are the only bird species with a range restricted to the State of Florida. They have specific habitat requirements and are entirely dependent on oak scrub communities. Scrub is characterized by 3-4 species of stunted, low-growing oaks and scattered sandy clearings. Preferred scrub-jay habitat occurs when the oaks are between 3-10 feet tall, along with sandy openings and very few, scattered trees.

In Sarasota County, most scrub-jay habitat occurs on scrubby pine flatwoods. The largest block of suitable habitat in Sarasota County is located in Oscar Scherer State Park. Other small "islands" of scrubby flatwoods are scattered throughout the county, mainly to the south. Fire ecology is also a critical element in scrub communities. Periodic fires limit tree height and maintain the sandy clearings that scrub-jays require. Historically, wildfires maintained the natural state of scrubby flatwoods. Due to development and population growth, these habitats must be maintained by prescribed burns. These periodic burns must take place every 8-15 years for optimal results.

adult
scrub-jay



Identification

The Florida scrub-jay is generally between 10-12 inches long. It is a blue and gray crestless jay that lacks the white wing spots and tail feather tips of the more common blue jay. The head, neck, nape, and tail are blue while the back and belly are pale gray. A necklace of blue feathers separates the whiter throat from the gray underparts, and a white line over the eye often blends into a whitish forehead. Males and females are similar in appearance. Juveniles can be distinguished from adults by their dusky brown head and neck.



juvenile
scrub-jay