

The Florida Scrub Jay: Their future is in our hands.

We are fortunate in Highlands County to share our rare and unique scrub communities with the Florida scrub jay. This intelligent bird is distinctive in many ways. Perhaps the attribute that attracts most folks to this inquisitive species is that it doesn't seem to have much fear of humans. It could be said that the scrub jay is almost tame in nature. They have been known to land on people's heads, hands and shoulders and even eat from their hands. The only place you can find the Florida scrub jay is in Central Florida's scrub habitat. Unfortunately, development of the scrub areas has affected the populations of scrub jays and unless their habitat is protected, they may be in danger of extinction.

The Florida scrub jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*) is the only species of bird endemic to Florida. These birds require open areas that healthy scrub habitats provide as well as the vegetation that exists in these communities. Scrub is a very dry habitat and generally the trees that exist there are less than 10 feet tall. There is little canopy cover and lots of open ground, which allows the jays to keep watch for predators. In addition, they require the oaks that reside in the scrub areas for their homes, nesting and food sources. It was once believed that displaced Florida scrub jays could possibly establish homes in other scrub areas. However, this belief has been dispelled because the Florida scrub jay is very territorial. When they are disrupted, they tend to get anxious, which upsets the reproduction cycle and eventually leads to isolation.

Scrub jays are omnivores and eat acorns, seeds, insects, frogs, turtles, snakes, lizards, eggs, nestlings and mice. In addition to being a somewhat friendly bird, they are a premier disperser of oak trees. They bury acorns to store for winter and those not consumed germinate, giving rise to new oak trees in the area. Thus, they are important birds for scrub habitat regeneration.

About a foot long from head to tail and colored much like a blue jay, the Florida scrub jay is a beautiful bird. They have a light gray forehead, white throat and no crest upon their head. The wings and tail are blue and their beak and legs are black. When young, less than six months old, they have a brownish head and neck.

Another interesting fact about scrub jays is their devotion toward family. Fledgling jays remain in their parent's habitat for several years and help to rear the young, watch out for predators and defend their territory against predators. The fledglings stay with the parents and baby brothers and sisters for about two or three years. Then they leave and find a mate of their own. Scrub jays mate for life and a breeding pair establishes a permanent territory of about 25 acres.

Development and fire suppression have taken their toll on Florida's scrub. For the habitat to remain healthy and attractive to the Florida scrub jay, it must be burned periodically. With urbanization creeping in, fires have become very undesirable and many of these areas have been suppressed from fire for years. This has caused the habitat to change and become undesirable to this unique creature. As a result, the Florida scrub jay was officially listed as a threatened state species by Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission in 1975 and as a threatened federal species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1987.

Highlands County is so unique. The scrub that exists here is found no where else in the world. The scrub jay that lives here can be found in no other state or country. It is a wonderful opportunity to be able to show this unique creature to our children and future generations. People from all over the world travel to watch this beautiful creature. Isn't it ironic that the bird that trusts people enough to eat from their hands is threatened with extinction by the same?

According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission you can help in the following ways:

1. SUPPORT 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.
2. PROVIDE HABITAT FOR SCRUB-JAYS. Plant, protect, and cultivate patches of shrubby scrub live oak, Chapman's oak, myrtle oak, and scrub oak on your property. Maintain all of your landscaping at a maximum of 10 feet in height if you live on or near scrub-jay habitat.
3. PROTECT SCRUB-JAYS FROM YOUR PETS. Encourage passage and strict enforcement of leash laws for cats and dogs in your community. Protect areas being used by nesting scrub-jays from domestic animals, especially cats.
4. RESTRICT 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 use of pesticides if possible; if you must use them, please do so with caution.
5. REPORT MALICIOUS DESTRUCTION OR HARASSMENT OF SCRUB-JAYS OR THEIR NESTS. 1-888-404-FWCC (3922).