

## Good News The Florida Scrub Jay Is Coming Back

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FOWR newsletter report

Of the many tribes of birds that inhabit our peninsula and the Wekiva River basin, the Florida scrub jay is the star. It is the only bird species endemic to Florida, i. e. found no where else in the world but in our state. In 1920 ornithologists estimate there might have been 10,000 of the bright blue, scratchy-throated jays in the whole state; but now Ralph Risch says we are down to around 6000.

Risch is the biologist running a highly successful research program in the Seminole State Forest and he gave the FOWR a marvelous slide show at the February meeting. In a very entertaining style of commentary, Risch detailed all the unusual behaviors of these friendly keystone dwellers of the ancient scrub habitats. These oldest parts of the state, desert ecosystems really, date back to the time when most of central Florida was a few island clusters and south Florida was under the sea. With hindsight we can say that upland development has destroyed so much of the scrub that now the species that depend on it are endangered or threatened.

The ideal shape of the scrub habitat for the jays to flourish is a recently burned community of sand live oaks, myrtle oaks, and Chapman's oaks to an average height of



just two meters. It also has to have some wide stretches of sandy or at least open spaces, so the jays can plant their acorn seeds to make it through the winter. Each fall, believe it or not, each jay has to hide from 3000-6000 acorns in order to survive the winter. What a prodigious feat of memory! Ralph treated us to the variety of ingenious ways they have of marking the ground where the acorn lies deep below the surface.

Their other favorite foods for the rest of the year are anoles, grasshoppers, butterfly larvae, spiders, and small snakes, all quite scarce during the cold of winter. Of course, if you want to band the jays for study, your best bet is a peanut which they will often come and eat right out of your hand. I once had the thrill of this experience in a coastal Brevard scrub.

Before Risch started his banding of scrub jays in the 25,000 acres of Seminole State Forest, we probably had only 20 scrub jays left; but this month he has counted 122, down a little from the peak of 180 he has registered. With an elaborate system of tiny, colored ankle bracelets, Risch can tell from a distance the sex and the identity of each bird.

The success of this program is due largely to the efforts of the burn crews of the forest service who in the last few years have completed the restoration of about 50% of the scrub habitat available in the forest. Risch is also keeping track of the number of available territories, now close to forty. Those scrub habitats will be fiercely defended in the acorn planting season by from one to five jays and might cover anywhere from 7 to 40 acres. So the good news is just beginning and the upside for population growth is very promising.

A few years ago a group of local high school students started a very reasonable campaign to have the legislature adopt the Florida scrub jay as the state bird, replacing the Northern mockingbird, Whitman's favorite. That effort fell short in Tallahassee, partly because legislators argued the bird was in decline from habitat loss. But in three short years the jays have made a spectacular recovery, showing once again, that if we preserve and restore a habitat, then manage it well, all the wildlife will thrive. Perhaps the legislature should reconsider.

Thanks so much to Joe Bishop, the forest manager, Mike Martin his cohort, and all the many volunteers who have pitched in with Ralph Risch to bring back to prominence our friendly, Florida star.

### **Building the River Community, Step 5**

All across the state now the scrub jays are being watched by a vast crew of citizen scientists, volunteers who work with biologists on state owned and private lands to insure the proper management of the wildlife in the precious scrub. The idea of enlisting the recreational time and energies of the local community is spreading across the state. People are adopting the river and its species, working to extract harmful exotics, looking to manage their own yards in ways conducive to a healthy river.

This year the FOWR has joined the local Seminole County Rotary Club in initiating another citizen effort, the Wekiva Promise. The idea is to get volunteers in every neighborhood to endorse the principles of lawn and yard management that will help conserve water and reduce the nutrients and nitrates flowing out of the aquifer and deteriorating the quality of aquatic wildlife and the health of our water supply.

Those who take the promise will be issued a decorative lawn icon to announce their support of the river ecology. Such a promise, a positive statement, goes much

further than any protest. It expands the forces of volunteer community work from PTAs, school crossing guards, hospice, neighborhood watch, meals on wheels, garage sales and recycling into lawn care, landscaping, water conservation, septic tank maintenance, and river cleanup. Voluntary compliance with the state's best management practices can spread then to the companies providing pest management, irrigation, lawn maintenance, and landscaping with native plants.

We need a grand chorus to sing the song of Wekiva, not only when we are enjoying its springs and river runs, its upland trails and wildlife, but also through participation in ongoing projects of restoration on both the public and private lands that we own in community.