



Audubon | FLORIDA

Jay Watch Report

2020 ANNUAL SUMMARY



Florida Scrub-Jay.
Photo: Shelly Rozenberg



Marianne Korosy,
Director of Bird
Conservation

There are so many things that I love about my work here at Audubon. Every day my time is devoted to birds, the people who support them, and the places they need. I collaborate with passionate and dedicated colleagues, and I am inspired by the birding community. But 2020 reminded me once again that it is partnering with you all, our volunteers and land managers, that remains one of the greatest privileges of working as part of the Audubon team. In a difficult year, you adapted with us for online trainings and new field protocols, both of which allowed us to collect Florida Scrub-Jay data effectively and safely. Did you know that Florida Scrub-Jays were recognized this year in a cover story of Audubon Magazine? Your work leads directly to conservation successes.

We are looking towards a brighter 2021. Thank you for being part of the Jay Watch family!

Marianne Korosy, Ph.D., *Director of Bird Conservation*



Jacquie Sulek,
Chapter Conservation
Manager and Jay
Watch Coordinator

One year ago most of us thought “zoom” was something that the Roadrunner did to escape the clutches of Wile E. Coyote! Six months later we were all tuning in for the annual Jay Watch trainings, listening, chatting, and asking questions online. Gasoline and travel time expenses were nonexistent and many had an extra hour or two to sleep in. Those who might have missed a nearby training on a particular date could make up their assignments at their convenience. And many folks who might never have thought to attend an advanced training had the option to do so. In fact, the feedback was so positive that we may continue to develop the online curriculum for the future. We all missed seeing one another and more importantly, few of us were able to get into

the field to do what brings us back to Jay Watch each year — spend time with those charismatic blue birds! Let us hope that in the months ahead sound science and creative thinking will allow us to once again gather to “Jay Watch.” In the meantime, thank you all for helping sustain this valuable community during such uncertain times.

Jacquie Sulek, *Chapter Conservation Manager and Jay Watch Coordinator*



2020 VOLUNTEER #S

57 Volunteers

SURVEYED



35 Sites

COUNTED

166

Family Groups

118

Juvenile Jays

455

Adult Jays

151

Volunteers Trained

189

Total Volunteers



DONATED

1,151 HOURS



Florida Scrub-Jay
Photo: Morris Foster

Adapting to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Jay Watch staff met the demands of a COVID-19 world with innovation. For the first time ever, we conducted trainings of 151 volunteers virtually, totaling over 640 training hours. Because of the virtual format, we could use the same webinars to share information about Florida Scrub-Jays with people across the state and the country.

In the field, changes to site access rules and the need to maintain social distancing meant that only experienced volunteers working directly with site managers monitored the scrub-jays this summer. Despite the heat, volunteers walked into the jays' habitat in areas where they once could drive separate 4WD vehicles on survey routes, keeping eyes and ears open for family groups.

Unfortunately, it was not a season without negative COVID-19 impacts. Audubon directed experienced volunteers to site managers who then set up survey teams. As a result, only a third of the usual volunteers completed surveys. Despite these challenges, we were still able to monitor 35 of the usual 45 sites Jay Watch usually covers, and volunteers look forward to getting back to all 45 next season.

Interested in becoming a volunteer?
Visit: fl.audubon.org/get-involved/jay-watch

How Researchers Hope to Save the Florida Scrub-Jay From an Inbreeding Crisis



A gorgeous Florida Scrub-Jay, photographed by frequent Audubon collaborator Carlton Ward, graced the cover of the winter issue of Audubon Magazine. In a rich, detailed story, Carrie Arnold outlines the efforts of scientists to bring more genetic diversity to isolated scrub-jay populations.

Arnold writes: “One factor that makes this prized species an ideal candidate for genetic rescue is the several decades of close study leading up to this moment. This work has demonstrated that the jays’ genetic health is a problem that conservationists need to be worried about.”

Your efforts as part of Jay Watch provide critical population data needed as a backdrop to these genetic



Florida Scrub-Jay.
Photo: Tamar Boorstin

rescue operations. It is your boots-on-the-ground monitoring that gives biologists and land managers the information they need to create a more resilient future for this endemic species through land management and genetic and behavioral research.

In addition to improving genetic diversity, Marianne Korosy, Ph.D., Director of Bird Conservation at Audubon Florida explains, “We still have to have prescribed fire management, and we still have to have enough land set aside in conservation to grow populations of jays.”

You can read the article here:
audubon.org/magazine/winter-2020/how-researchers-hope-save-florida-scrub-jay



Special Webinar for Jay Watch Volunteers

End of Year Celebration

At the end of 2020, Jay Watch volunteers came together for a special webinar in appreciation for their efforts over the course of the monitoring season. More than 100 volunteers and Audubon staff members attended the morning event, which included a hello from Jacquie Sulek, a Jay Watch season recap presentation by Marianne Korosy as well as an overview of the federal Florida Scrub-Jay recovery plan given by Todd Mecklenborg of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Todd reviewed each of the focal landscapes embedded in the recovery plan including core, support, and auxiliary scrub sites where scrub-jays reside or could reside with habitat restoration and translocation of family groups. We hope that we can all gather in person again in 2021!

To watch the Florida Scrub-Jay webinars, click here:
fl.audubon.org/about-us/florida-scrub-jay-webinars

M-CORES Task Force

Recommendations will Protect Florida Scrub-Jays

Three Department of Transportation (DOT) task forces have concluded their recommendations on potential new corridors through Florida's rural areas as part of the M-CORES program, or Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance. The connector to the Suncoast Parkway could have been built through Florida's heartland — prime Florida Scrub-Jay habitat — and intersected with Ross Prairie State Forest and Halpata-Tastanaki Preserve. Additionally, the Southwest-Suncoast route could have bisected Archbold Biological Station as well as several Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission preserves that are vital to the Lake Wales Ridge population of scrub-jays.

This year, new Senate President Wilton Simpson (R-Dade City) has said publicly that he is not a fan of the proposal. Further, as credible voices for fiscal restraint have pointed out, the cost to build these roadways may be over \$25 billion. That cost could divert funds from urgently needed highway improvements, particularly in urban areas.

Sen. Tom Lee worked with Audubon on the original 2019 legislation and created the task forces to which Audubon's Paul Gray, Ph.D., and Charles Lee were appointed. The Task Force recommendations are very strong, and require road-builders to favor expanding existing roads rather than building new ones to avoid conservation lands and wildlife habitats. They even require DOT to develop and fund a plan to acquire for preservation Florida Forever projects not yet purchased by the state within a 10-mile radius of any project. The paths of these new roads would have opened large parts of remaining rural Florida to development, and potentially destroyed important conservation lands and wildlife habitats.

The M-CORES statute requires DOT to adhere to the Task Force recommendations, which have statutory weight, and are not just advisory.

The Task Forces called on the Legislature to re-visit the timeline for the M-CORES projects, pushing dates out substantially from the unrealistic construction start date and 2030 completion date in current law.

Extending or eliminating arbitrary deadlines will allow

DOT to reprogram some of the proposal's extraordinary funding to transportation projects with demonstrated need and feasibility.

Audubon will also advocate for legislative direction that these Task Force recommendations should apply to any future proposals for these roads.

This is not the first time we have seen these road proposals, nor will it likely be the last. Road-builders and land speculators have advocated for them for decades. If the M-CORES legislation was completely repealed, the strong protections the Task Forces have required for conservation lands, wildlife, rural lands, and more would be lost.

By amending the timeline but not rejecting the entirety of the M-CORES legislation, we can ensure that if these proposals are ever resurrected, so too will the Task Force evaluations and recommendations. New road proposals of this magnitude must always be gauged on their need, merit, and financial feasibility.

Highlights of the Task Forces' findings:

- **There is NO consensus based on current data to support new "greenfield" turnpikes through the study areas (a "greenfield" project is a new road through areas where roads do not now exist).**
- **The Task Forces recommend that DOT consider upgrading or expanding existing roads if new capacity is needed, and potentially co-locating toll lanes within or adjacent to existing roads, or in certain circumstances, very large existing power line rights of way.**
- **The Task Forces demanded real economic and traffic projection data to support the need for any new road construction, and specified considerations for the things DOT must include in the "need" determination process.**
- **The Task Forces required that DOT stay completely out of any conservation lands with any new alignments, and included recommendations for incorporating wildlife crossings.**

As we look towards the 2021 legislative season, Audubon Florida will push for a partial repeal of the road projects, in alignment with the Task Force recommendations.

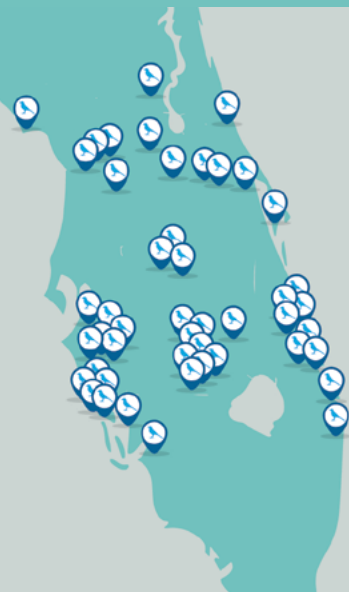


Photo: John Wolaver

FLORIDA SCRUB-JAYS NEED YOU!

With 45 sites continually monitored by dedicated Jay Watch community scientists each season, we are learning a lot about jays' efforts to persist in their home state. This important data informs management decisions that can help, or hinder, growth of scrub-jay populations. Without your support, the data that is collected remains only numbers. We need your help to ensure those numbers translate into dollars that can help leverage more support for Florida Scrub-Jays and scrub habitat protection.

45 Sites
Monitored by
Audubon
Jay Watch
Community
Scientists



While Scrub-Jays have been determined to be extirpated from Palm Beach County, Jay Watch continues to monitor the Jupiter Ridge Natural Area where they were last sighted in Palm Beach County.

Special Thanks to the 2020 Jay Watch Supporters

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AudubonJayWatch.org