



Audubon | FLORIDA

# Jay Watch Report

**2022 ANNUAL SUMMARY**



Photo: Preston Bertka-Ballard, student in Audubon  
Florida's Conservation Leadership Initiative program.



**Audrey  
DeRose-Wilson**

So much has happened since our last Jay Watch report, including Hurricanes Ian and Nicole that caused widespread impacts across the state. Although hurricanes can cause significant damage to human communities, Florida's scrub habitats and species evolved with hurricanes and are resilient to high winds and flooding. Jay Watchers reported that scrub-jays in Charlotte County (page 4) were out and about shortly after Hurricane Ian, which made landfall just a few miles away.

I am thrilled to report more good news since last year: thanks to strong advocacy, M-CORES was officially extinguished by the Florida Legislature and replaced with Senate Bill 100. Instead of a new Northern Turnpike Extension, this bill calls for improvements restricted to the existing I-75 corridor.

Finally, I want to thank each and every Jay Watcher both for your commitment to these birds as well as your dedication to conducting surveys following the Jay Watch protocols, which is critical for the accuracy of our data (page 3). Jay Watchers contributed collectively nearly a thousand hours and endured extreme heat, biting insects, and dense scrub habitat to complete last year's survey at Jay Watch sites (page 8).

Audrey DeRose-Wilson, *Director of Bird Conservation*



**Jacqui Sulek**

It's winter and the Florida Scrub-Jays are well into their fall stash of acorns. For Jay Watchers, now is the time for a cool walk in the scrub, a chance to take some pictures, browse the Audubon Jay Watch Facebook page, or maybe just reflect. What did the program accomplish in the past year and what lies ahead? By following the Jay Watch survey protocol, you are ensuring that the data Jay Watch provides are valuable to land managers, policy makers, and scientists (page 3).

At our November Jay Watch celebration, we heard about leading-edge research on the role that genetics could have in sustaining healthy populations of Florida Scrub-Jays (page 5). There are many questions yet to be considered. Land management, translocations, banding, and long-term genetic testing and monitoring will depend on collaboration, will, and funding. Where does Jay Watch fit in? As we have demonstrated over the years, data collected through this community science program will remain a critical piece of the puzzle.

As ambassadors, you continue to educate Floridians through formal presentations, classroom lectures, Audubon Adventures stories, and even just through casual conversation. And this year, for the first time, a volunteer-led campaign raised more than \$10,000 to support Jay Watch (page 6)! For all of your efforts, we THANK YOU! To all the Audubon Jay Watchers and partners, thank you and hope to see you in the scrub!

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



# Community Science is Saving the Florida Scrub-Jay

## IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HABITAT!

The Florida Scrub-Jay is our state's only endemic bird species, found nowhere else in the world. Federally Threatened under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Endangered Species Act in 1987, the state's population of Florida Scrub-Jays is estimated to have declined by 90% since the early 1800s. These declines are largely due to loss of native scrub habitat to development, agriculture, and decades of fire exclusion that allowed the scrub to become overgrown and unsuitable for scrub-jays.

Declining numbers argue that more needs to be done to keep Florida Scrub-Jays flying and Jay Watchers play a vital role in the conservation of these iconic birds. Not only do Jay Watchers contribute data to inform management decisions that benefit scrub-jays, but Jay Watch provides support and resources for individuals and communities to advocate for land use and habitat management policies and decisions that benefit their local populations of jays.

## 20 YEARS OF JAY WATCH

For 20 years, Jay Watch volunteers have monitored jays at sites where managers and researchers do not have resources dedicated to the species.

A significant challenge of a large-scale volunteer data effort like Jay Watch is ensuring that data collected by hundreds of volunteers at dozens of sites is consistent and reliable. At the very start of Jay Watch, a committee of researchers and managers developed a scientifically rigorous protocol for estimating scrub-jay numbers and reproductive success that performed well across sites with very different habitat characteristics and jay populations. Since then, this data collection protocol and the volunteers who implement it have stood the test of time. The program is now a model that demonstrates the effectiveness of community science done right.

In 2012, Audubon Florida began coordinating the Jay Watch community science program statewide. We train and support volunteers to monitor Florida Scrub-Jays at more than 45 sites in 19 counties. Jay Watch volunteers provide annual data for many public lands that do not have enough staff to perform regular surveys on their own.



Jay Watch volunteers conducting a survey at Saddle Blanket Preserve.

Photo: Jacqui Sulek/Audubon

**How is this information used? In land management, policy work, and outreach initiatives.**

## JAY WATCH DATA LEADS TO BETTER OUTCOMES

**Land management:** Because the jays live in Florida scrub habitat, which needs to be burned or managed with mechanical treatment to persist, many land managers in Florida rely on Jay Watch data as they plan prescribed burns to ensure optimal habitat. Data contributed by Jay Watchers is used by land managers when making decisions about when and where to conduct prescribed fires to create better habitat, increase nesting success, and ultimately support more scrub-jays.

**Policy:** Jay Watch data is used in public meetings to support pro-jay habitat management, including decisions about encroaching development and habitat management plans.

**Outreach:** Audubon staff members are regularly called upon to give their expertise to media outlets. In the past year, articles have appeared in the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Tampa Bay Times* and another is slated for *BirdWatching Daily Magazine*. These pieces spread the word on how we can protect this unique species.

## ALL THANKS TO JAY WATCHERS

Audubon's work would not be possible without the amazing cadre of dedicated volunteers who go above and beyond to ensure they follow the proper protocols when counting scrub-jays. Each year, Audubon staff provides training for new volunteers and reviews advanced protocols for veteran surveyors. In all, more than 90 volunteers contributed nearly 1000 hours performing field surveys across the state this year. See the infographic on page 8. We thank every volunteer for their heroic efforts, as well as the supporters of this program.



## Photography: Tool for Conservation and Education

The scrub is a very colorful place! Taking photos tells the story of the beauty of the scrub – one of the most endangered habitats in the world, with only about 5% of its original coverage area remaining.



Family group of Florida Scrub-Jays photographed at  
Tippecanoe Environmental Park in Charlotte County.  
Photo: Jim Rogers

**Whether you are intimately involved with  
a particular site and the families that live  
there, are gathering scientific data, or just  
enjoying the beauty of the scrub, we need  
your photos!**



This scrub-jay was photographed on Armour Terrace just  
days after Hurricane Ian's western eyewall tore through  
the North Port community. Photo: Jim Rogers



A banded scrub-jay (upper right) with a family member.  
Photo: Shelly Rozenberg



Photos often show if Florida Scrub-Jays are banded. Bands allow researchers to trace life histories, stories of survival, new pair bonds and divorces, and on very rare occasions, birds moving away from their home territories.



Photos capture behaviors, personalities, family bonds, and roles. They are especially helpful in identifying young birds before their gapes disappear and the grayish-brown feathers are replaced by the cornflower blue and silver feathers of the adults.



Importantly, photographs are easily used for education opportunities, presentations, and social media, especially on sites like the Audubon Jay Watch Facebook page. In fact, Jay Watch photographers are often featured in publications – including this annual report!



# A Day at Jonathan Dickinson State Park

Late in the fall, once the flurry of Jay Watch surveys has passed and the numbers have been crunched, we acknowledge all the time and effort of our Jay Watch volunteers and partners during the year. In 2022, we held the Jay Watch appreciation event at Jonathan Dickinson State Park (JDSP).

## WHY JONATHAN DICKINSON STATE PARK?

Three years ago, after several decades of careful management of the park scrub and a modest Florida Scrub-Jay population, JDSP became the recipient site for the translocation of several families of Florida Scrub-Jays from Ocala National Forest. Research and daily monitoring of the translocated birds temporarily replaced the regular Jay Watch surveys, and on November 5, the appreciation event invited everyone to learn more and celebrate these achievements.

## APPRECIATION EVENT STARTS WITH A FIELD TRIP, ENDS WITH HIGH-LEVEL PRESENTATIONS

At dawn, approximately 25 early birds took to the trails for an early morning walk in the scrub with dedicated JDSP volunteers Jim Howe and Georgia Binderow. Others from around the state made their way to the Kimbell Environmental Education and Research Center in the park for a meet-and-greet before the more formal happenings of the day.

After a warm welcome by Park Specialist (and event planner extraordinaire) Sara Luering, participants listened to four presentations, each building upon the one before. Natasha Lehr, Research Technician at Michigan State University, presented her thought-provoking presentation entitled *Translocation and Demographic Monitoring of Florida Scrub-Jays at Jonathan Dickinson State Park*. Rob Rossmann, Park Biologist, spoke about the history of land management and Florida Scrub-Jay population fluctuations at JDSP. Highly anticipated as always was the *Jay Watch Survey Results Recap 2022* by Audrey DeRose-Wilson, Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon Florida. Audrey organized the 2022 survey data in simple, easy-to-read tables that readily displayed trends at each site.

The final talk of the day came from Reed Bowman, PhD, Emeritus Research Biologist at Archbold Biological Station. Dr. Bowman has studied the jays for 30 years, been a great partner to the Audubon Jay Watch



The 2022 appreciation event was hosted at Jonathan Dickinson State Park, the southernmost site in our Florida Scrub-Jay monitoring network.

Pictured (l to r): Audrey DeRose Wilson, Craig Faulhaber, Natasha Lehr, John Fitzpatrick, Reed Bowman, and Jacqui Sulek. Photo: Jim Rogers

program, and received the prestigious Guy Bradley award from Audubon Florida in 2021. With his retirement imminent, he summed up his experience and shared his thoughts about the future.

Dr. Bowman's talk, *A 30-year Perspective: What Do Scrub-jays Really Need, and Can We Manage It?*, made it clear that the future of this charismatic and fascinating species depends on us. The answer to his presentation's burning question, according to Dr. Bowman, is "yes, we can save them, but we are always going to have to do things to keep them here."



Photographs showing color-banded scrub-jays provide crucial life history data.

Photo: Shelly Rozenberg







Jay Watch Appreciation Event hosted on Nov. 5, 2022.  
Photo: Jim Rogers

## It Takes a Village!

Jay Watchers are passionate, dedicated, and generous with their time, and money! This fall, one volunteer in particular, Stephen Kintner, Vice President and Conservation chair, together with his chapter, West Volusia Audubon, made it a mission to raise \$10,000 to support Jay Watch. Chapters can designate a specific program for their donation, and Kintner came up with a creative idea: why not have his chapter set up a special campaign and fund?

Kintner's history goes way back to the protection of the 360-acre Lyonia Preserve and the building of the Lyonia Environmental Center. For more than ten years, he has coordinated the Jay Watch surveys at Lyonia and is the primary volunteer coordinator at the Center. His photos adorn rack cards and most recently the cover of Audubon Adventures.

Kintner is an annual donor to Jay Watch and, when hearing of a shortfall for the Jay Watch program, suggested he put his gift up as a match to encourage others to donate. After some discussion with Audubon Florida's team and encouragement from his chapter, he launched the first chapter-led Jay Watch campaign. It was a labor of love. He created a landing page for the chapter, set up online accounts with Paypal and Facebook, and created a QR code that led directly to the donate page.



Stephen Kintner, West Volusia Audubon, raised \$11,000 for Florida Scrub-Jays.



The goal was to raise \$10,000 by the end of the calendar year. At the 2022 appreciation event on November 5, the campaign was unveiled, complete with a short tutorial for those unfamiliar with how to use a QR code. The very first donation came in right then and there: \$500!

Over the course of the next six weeks, donations poured in, ranging from \$10 to \$1,000! Upon the passing of long-time Jay steward Fred Hunter, Fred's family also asked their friends and family to contribute to West Volusia Audubon's Jay Watch fund in honor of Fred. By the end of the year, the campaign had generated close to \$11,000.

**Many thanks to  
West Volusia Audubon,  
Venice Area Audubon,  
Audubon Everglades, and  
Alachua Audubon that have  
each donated, per approval  
of their boards.**



**Scan Here to  
Donate Today!**

**[Click Here to Donate!](#)**

The Paypal site will remain live over the next year so that it continues to accumulate funds for the program. Kintner hopes that more chapters, especially those that participate in Jay Watch, will follow suit.



**"Goodbye ... See you soon ..."  
Fred Hunter named this image  
taken by Milton Heiberg in 2017.**



Fred Hunter, owner and guardian of a private, 600-acre Florida Scrub-Jay preserve, passed away early in 2023. Memorial gifts in his name were made through the West Volusia Audubon Society fund.

**Photo: Preston Bertka-Ballard, student in Audubon  
Florida's Conservation Leadership  
Initiative program.**







Florida Scrub-Jay.  
Photo: Paul Strauss



**97**   
**DEDICATED  
VOLUNTEERS  
CONTRIBUTED**

 **985** **SURVEY  
HOURS** 

**AT**  **46 SITES**

**COUNTED**

**246** **FAMILY GROUPS**

**173** **JUVENILE JAYS**

**585** **ADULT JAYS**



**TOTAL JAYS 764**

Special Thanks to the  
2022 Jay Watch Supporters

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