



Audubon | FLORIDA

# Jay Watch Report

2023 ANNUAL SUMMARY



Florida Scrub-Jay.  
Photo: Steven Chu/Audubon Photography Awards



**Audrey  
DeRose-Wilson**

I will look back at this Jay Watch season with a sense of pride in the work of our volunteers and also with nostalgia: 2023 marked Jacqui Sulek's last season as the co-coordinator of Jay Watch! Jacqui's determination to not only protect the Florida Scrub-Jay but inspire others to do the same charts a course for a more resilient future for this colorful, endemic species. We are all grateful.

Scorching summer temperatures didn't dissuade our Jay Watchers from dedicating 1,050 hours to document 235 scrub-jay family groups. On page 3, we detail what it takes to be a Jay Watch ambassador, working with students and the next generation of scrub-jay conservation leaders to protect these birds now and into the future. As in past years, state-owned lands form an important population bulwark for the jays as a whole, especially areas like the Cross Florida Greenway triangle that are home to mid-size populations of jays (page 4).

Audrey DeRose-Wilson, *Director of Bird Conservation*



Photo: Shelly Rozenberg

**To all our Jay Watchers reading these pages, thank you again for your efforts this season to record jay sightings. We hope our stories inspire others to take future action. Learn more at: [fl.audubon.org/get-involved/jay-watch](https://fl.audubon.org/get-involved/jay-watch)**

## 12 Years with Jay Watch: A Retrospective from Jacqui Sulek

Audubon Florida began running the Jay Watch program in 2012. Each year we train volunteers who can then survey specific sites across Florida in June and July, assisting land managers in gathering important data. The results provide a snapshot of how the resident jay populations are faring. My first task a dozen years ago was to plan a celebration to honor them. Looking back, I realize that while so many things have changed, much remains the same.

### THE BIG PIVOT

The pandemic brought big challenges and the need to try novel approaches in our community science program. For two years we worked with bare bones teams and cut survey days back while trying to maintain continuity. Out of necessity, we developed and recorded a series of online training courses that included *Florida Scrub-Jay Ecology*, *Survey Protocol*, and *Advanced Training*. These virtual sessions are still available on demand and continue to engage a wide audience, from folks who just want to know more about the jays to people who want to participate in surveys, and even veteran volunteers looking to refresh their skills. In-person training is still available at two sites and we have redesigned the agenda to maximize the opportunity to observe and interpret behavior and record critical data. Prior to the event we ask participants to take

the foundational classes online, so the entire session focuses on skill building.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

**Our Facebook community** has grown to include more than 650 members. Frequent posts include photographs, lessons on scrub habitat, banding practice, exciting travels, and good news. For those who are just becoming familiar with these fascinating birds it is an educational tool; for others it is a trip to the scrub any time of year. The page has become a photo gallery and resource for this annual report and other publications while connecting volunteers around Florida.



**Jacqui Sulek**

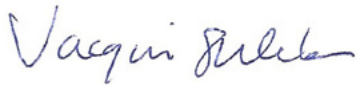
### REMEMBERING REED BOWMAN

Sadly, shortly after his retirement Reed Bowman, PhD, a champion for the Florida Scrub-Jay, passed away. Dr. Bowman touched so many people and countless generations of jays. His contribution to research, knowledge, and resources is vast and his legacy will play a monumental role in the future of the species. Last year he spoke at our volunteer celebration on the results of relocations and

their efficacy in boosting populations where landscapes have been restored.

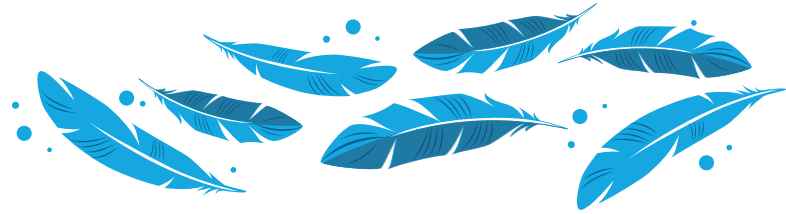
### CELEBRATING THE RECENT SEASON, LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

As my final task for Jay Watch, I hosted the 2023 appreciation event. And while there will be a new person filling these shoes the questions will remain: Are we listening to the birds? What are we doing right? What more do we need to know? What will it take to assure a future for the jays?



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

As you may have heard it said, “the only constant is change.” My appreciation and gratitude for our volunteers, partners, researchers, and Florida Scrub-Jay groupies is endless! And little did I know when it all started 12 years ago that this gregarious, intelligent, and beautiful blue and gray character of the scrub would be wrapped around my heart forever!



## Highlights: Jay Watch Ambassadors

**Jay Watch is built on partnerships. Amy Compare and Analee Monrreal inspire students to be involved in Florida Scrub-Jay Conservation.**

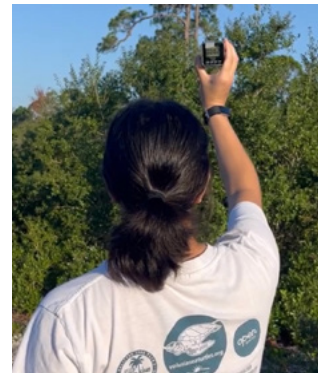
**Amy Compare** first began her Jay Watch work as a volunteer program biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. In 2023, when she stepped into her new role at the Alachua Land Trust (ALT), she brought her enthusiasm for the jays to a whole new audience.

This summer, Amy led a cohort of eight interns at ALT. As one of their enrichment activities the students attended a Jay Watch training at the Cross Florida Greenway Triangle (learn more on page 4). Amy explains: “This was their only opportunity to see Florida scrub habitat and hear about the importance of fire and other land management tools. They also interacted with resource professionals and saw possibilities for careers in the environmental field.” All the students went on to participate in the jay surveys.

“They loved Jay Watch and one student has recently interviewed for a job working with Florida Scrub-Jays.”  
— Amy Compare, Jay Watch Ambassador

**Analee Monrreal** recently graduated from Stetson University with a bachelor’s degree in Environmental Science. She hopes to continue to study for her master’s degree and use GIS for scrub-jay conservation at Lyonia Preserve. Though she visited Lyonia before her first official Jay

Watch survey, she reveled in how much she could see when approaching the visit through the data protocol. “I learned to identify the jays based on their age and sex. Watching them was an unforgettable experience,” she said.



Analee uses her passion for the natural world to help birds and the places they need. In addition to her work for Jay Watch, she attended the Audubon Florida Assembly in October and travelled to Washington, D.C. to lobby for seabirds with National Audubon Society staff. She plans to join West Volusia Audubon to continue to share her passion for birds and conservation.

“As a past Stetson Audubon ambassador, I had the pleasure of learning about Jay Watch from Stephen Kintner (learn more on page 5). His explanation of Jay Watch immediately caught my attention and inspired me to volunteer. I’m grateful for the opportunity to contribute to such a meaningful initiative and to make a positive impact.”  
— Analee Monrreal, Jay Watch Ambassador

Mid-sized jay populations are crucial to the long-term success of the species. Photo: Kimberly Rexroat



## To Protect Florida Scrub-Jays, We Need Populations of All Sizes

If you're looking for Florida Scrub-Jays, chances are you'll find them in Ocala National Forest, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, and Lake Wales Ridge. Approximately 75% of all scrub-jay family groups live at one of these four sites.

"That's a risk for the species as a whole," explains Audubon's Director of Bird Conservation Audrey DeRose-Wilson. "We need more population locations to protect jays from disease, storm impacts, and habitat changes."

The solution? Invest in management and restoration efforts not only for large jay population centers, but moderate-sized populations too. Recovery for the Florida Scrub-Jay is more than just meeting a target number of birds or family groups; we also need enough populations and genetic diversity within those populations to ensure the jay's long-term future.

The Cross Florida Greenway Triangle (CFG) represents a moderate-sized population center that needs to be protected. The CFG not only hosts one of Audubon's annual Jay Watch trainings, its staff also coordinates one of the largest Jay Watch efforts of the season and actively works to manage the site for the jays. In the 2023 count, 44 family groups made their homes within the CFG. The team, led by Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Laurie Dolan, experimented with different mechanical techniques to remove vegetation and restore scrub habitat to as close to what can be achieved with fire as possible. Prescribed fire is the best management tool for scrub-jays, but the proximity to the I-75 thoroughfare and residential neighborhoods means that fire can't be used to maintain enough good habitat for jays at this site. Dolan and her team augment the fires they can set with mechanical management techniques to create open scrub. Since restoration efforts began in 2004, the population has steadily increased from eight scrub-jays to the current 44 family groups—a stunning success story for this vulnerable species.

It's worth noting that populations with 10-39 family groups play an important role in population recovery because they hold genetic diversity and increase opportunities for scrub-jays to disperse. However, the few populations outside of the strongholds with over 40 family groups are especially resilient and important to recovery.

Audubon continues to work with partners across more than 45 Jay Watch sites to collect data, inform land management decisions, and work toward policy solutions that will protect and restore habitat. As more areas gain 40+ jay families, the closer we will come to species recovery.



Photo: Shelly Rozenberg

# Celebration, Science, and Cake!

## The 2023 Jay Watch Appreciation Event

At the Lyonia Environmental Center in Volusia County, visitors stepping out of their cars into the parking lot just might hear a Florida Scrub-Jay calling in the distance. The beautiful Florida scrub is accessible via a short nearby trail, making the Center the perfect spot for our 2023 Jay Watch Appreciation Event.

More than 60 volunteers gathered on November 4 for this traditional celebration. The day began with a guided walk in the scrub followed by a “pot luck” coffee break. Center Manager Christie Miller gave Jay Watchers a warm welcome and field trip leader and docent Stephen Kintner shared a short history of the Lyonia Environmental Center. We were thrilled to announce and present Stephen with the prestigious National Audubon Society Charles H. Callison Award for Volunteer of the Year! As the conservation chair/vice president of West Volusia Audubon and a full-time volunteer himself, Stephen has been singing the praises of Audubon Jay Watch volunteers for years.

Next, Audrey DeRose-Wilson, director of bird conservation for Audubon Florida, gave the highly-anticipated Jay Watch survey results recap for 2023. Our results continue to show the importance of scrub management. Well-managed populations like the CFG triangle, Lyonia Preserve, and many state parks are stable or growing, with nesting success. We also saw very high productivity at Rock Springs Run, a site with seven family groups that produced at least seven juveniles. It appears to have been a good year across the state with higher-than-average numbers of juveniles recorded at many sites.

Karl E. Miller, PhD, avian research scientist at the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, followed with a review of statewide trends in Florida Scrub-Jay populations with a focus on Ocala National Forest, prompting many questions and lively discussion.

In an afternoon presentation, Chase Kimmell from the Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida enlightened the audience about a unique umbrella species: the endangered blue calamintha bees that share and depend on scrub plants and habitat.



Stephen Kintner receives his award.

We wrapped up the day when Paula Tedrow—outreach coordinator for the Lyonia Environmental Center—took on her alter ego as Smilax Fleaback for a dynamic and surprisingly competitive round of “Scrub Jeopardy.”

We are grateful to the West Volusia Audubon Society and Lyonia Environmental Center teams for hosting another fun and successful celebration.

Most importantly, we cannot thank our volunteers enough for their dedication to the scrub-jays. Your work creates a brighter future for this iconic species!

No celebratory Jay Watch lunch is complete without cake! Bird and animal-themed cake chef Arak Ohanyan designed this year’s Jay Watch cake. Both gorgeous and scientifically accurate, all parts of the cake were completely edible, including the bird, the cactus, and the four species of scrub-oak leaves and acorns.





**112**   
**DEDICATED  
VOLUNTEERS  
CONTRIBUTED**

 **1050**  **SURVEY  
HOURS**

**AT**  **46 SITES**

**COUNTED**

**235** **FAMILY GROUPS**

**183** **JUVENILE JAYS**

**488** **ADULT JAYS**



**TOTAL JAYS**

**671**

Special Thanks to the  
2023 Jay Watch Supporters

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Photo: Jim Rogers



**Join Jay Watch:**

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**To Donate:**

Contact Victoria Johnston  
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