



Audubon | FLORIDA

Jay Watch Report

2024 ANNUAL SUMMARY



Florida Scrub-Jay.
Photo: Shay Saldana
/Audubon Photography Awards

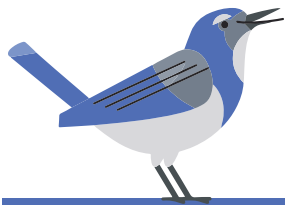


Audrey DeRose-Wilson

Things continue to change and move forward in the world of the Florida Scrub-Jay! While a new statewide census shows there are more jays in Ocala National Forest than previously thought, researchers and land managers are looking to the future to bolster jays at other historical breeding sites across the state as they face encroaching development and a changing climate.

I continue to be inspired and impressed by the passion and dedication of Jay Watchers as they work to protect birds and the places they need. After Florida dealt with three major storms during the 2024 hurricane season, volunteers rallied at the appreciation event in October to celebrate success and pivot to the next season.

Audrey DeRose-Wilson,
Director of Bird Conservation



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: AudubonJayWatch.org

A Survey of Jay Watch Sites

Twelve Jay Watch-monitored sites have had long-term stable or increasing populations. Kudos to the land stewards of these sites whose diligent habitat management has resulted in these positive trends over the years!

- Highlands Hammock State Park
- Lake June-in-Winter Scrub Preserve
- Rock Springs Run
- Edward W. Chance Reserve at Gilley Creek
- Moody Branch
- Cross Florida Greenways Triangle
- Jonathan Dickinson State Park
- Savannahs Preserve State Park
- Allen David Broussard Catfish Creek Preserve State Park
- Saddle Blanket Scrub Preserve
- Blue Spring State Park
- Lyonia Preserve

Consistent management of scrub habitat has resulted in the success of these populations over the long term.

Many of our Jay Watch sites are small, isolated populations in fragmented habitat patches; 13 Jay Watch sites have three or fewer family groups. Unless these small sites are close enough to larger sites for the birds to move between them, they are likely to continue to decline and eventually disappear. Scrub-jays have disappeared from seven Jay Watch sites that used to have small populations, while 10 other Jay Watch sites have had population declines.



Savannahs Preserve State Park.
Photo: Paul Strauss



Jonathan Dickinson State Park.
Photo: Paul Strauss

Highlights: Jay Watch Ambassadors

Jay Watch is built on partnerships. Ambassadors inspire volunteers to be involved in Florida Scrub-Jay conservation.

Callie Ingram

Callie is originally from Johnson City, Tennessee, but currently resides in Jacksonville. With a background in marine biology and research, she developed a passion for birding after moving to Florida, leading her to volunteer with Audubon Florida. After seeing her first scrub-jay, she says “I fell in love instantly!”



Photo: Sheri Douse Photography

Through her volunteering experiences, including Jay Watch and shorebird stewardship, Callie has connected with like-minded individuals and professionals in the field. One of her favorite memories was during her first survey route in 2024, when a scrub-jay landed on her head and tried to pull apart her hat. Volunteering with Audubon Florida has enriched her birding journey and opened up new career opportunities in avian research.



Julia Wiggins

Julia was born and raised in Vero Beach. After college, she shifted from a passion for bass fishing to a love for birdwatching, a hobby her father inspired during their summers in the Appalachian Mountains. In the fall of 2017,

she met Joe Carroll, the Indian River County coordinator for Jay Watch, and began volunteering. Julia quickly became dedicated to the cause, eventually taking on a leadership role in the program.

Through volunteering with Jay Watch, Julia has found a deep sense of purpose and connection. She treasures the opportunity to learn from others and from the birds themselves, appreciating the remarkable resilience of the jays and the intricacies of their daily survival.

Hanna Beery

Hanna, a dedicated volunteer from Deltona, first discovered Jay Watch in 2023 through an Instagram post by Friends of Lyonia Environmental Center. She eagerly joined her first count and loved every moment of it. Her passion for conservation and the Florida Scrub-Jay grew, and she was honored when Stephen Kintner asked her to lead a survey group in 2024. As she continues in this role, Hanna feels a strong sense of duty to serve her local ecosystem, particularly as a voice for the jays, which are unable to advocate for themselves.

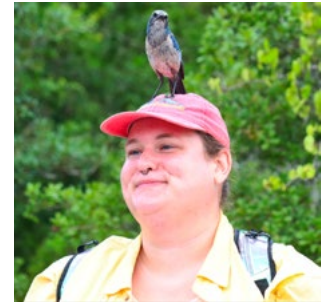


Photo: PJ Leonard

Volunteering with Jay Watch has also introduced her to other inspiring women in the natural sciences, giving her role models to look up to as she considers a future career path.



Photo: Carey Larosa

Scott and Carey Larosa

Scott and Carey, who live in Ocala, have strong connections to nature and wildlife conservation. Scott, a retired law enforcement officer with FWC in Key Largo, and Carey, originally from Washington, D.C., discovered Jay Watch in 2017

by visiting a Jay Watch table at the Florida SpringsFest in Silver Springs State Park.

They quickly became enthusiastic community scientists, drawn to the adventure and joy of observing Florida Scrub-Jays, which they find both cute and quite entertaining. They have expanded their involvement by adding a new survey area in the Greenway; more places for scrub-jay parties, we hope!



Jay Watchers Celebrated at Annual Appreciation Event in Highlands Hammock State Park

On October 26, Jay Watch volunteers from around Florida came together at Highlands Hammock State Park for the annual Jay Watch Appreciation Event. The day included a scrub walk, informative presentations, a special cake, and door prizes to thank our volunteers for their dedication.

Highlands Hammock is home to a small but resilient population of Florida Scrub-Jays. Volunteers began the day by choosing between a guided scrub walk or expedition to see a local Bald Eagle nest.



Photo: Jim Rogers



Photo: Jim Rogers

Park Service Specialist Carla Kappmeyer-Sherwin started the morning presentation with an introduction to the park. She provided an overview of the damage and ongoing trail closures caused by Hurricane Milton, which had crossed the state near Highlands Hammock roughly two weeks before the event. After a presentation about the Ridge Rangers program, an FWC initiative to enlist community volunteers to restore habitat, Audubon Florida Director of Bird Conservation Audrey DeRose-Wilson gave an overview of the 2024 jay season surveys with an emphasis on the importance of habitat management. While some populations continue to accommodate a stable population with good productivity, many smaller populations continue to decline.

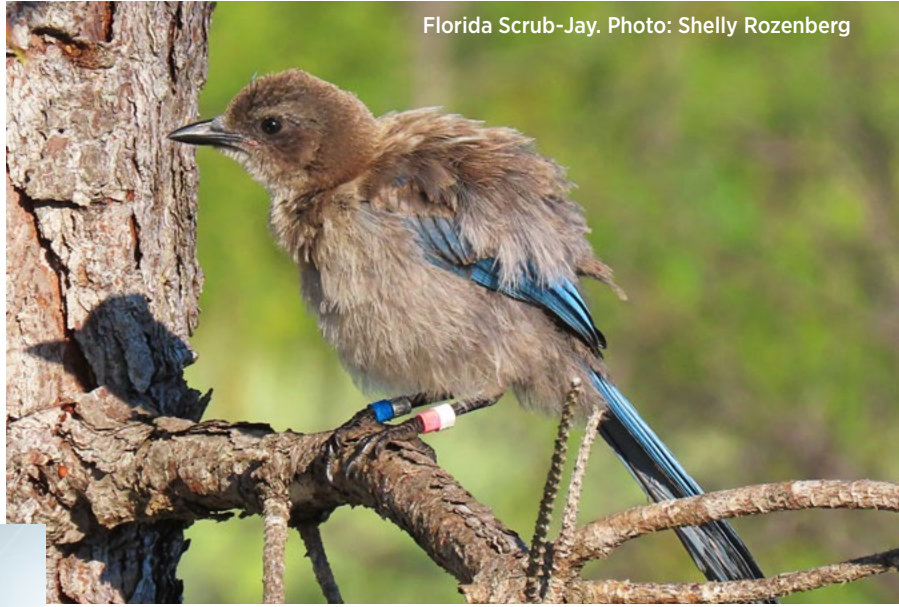
To conclude the talks, Mike Knight with the Brevard County Environmentally Endangered Lands program shared the remarkable success story of scrub restoration and Florida Scrub-Jay translocation efforts at Malabar Scrub Sanctuary. Thanks to the support of local community members and Jay Watchers who rallied at a series of public meetings in support of restoration, the population at Malabar has expanded to 10 family groups, and translocated birds are now breeding at the site.

We are truly thankful for each of you and your steadfast commitment to protecting the Florida Scrub-Jay. Thank you, Jay Watchers, for everything you do, and thank you to Highlands County Audubon Society for your help with the event!

Florida Scrub-Jays in a Warming World

A long-term study of Florida Scrub-Jays at Archbold Biological Station shows that these birds are already changing their behavior in response to our changing climate.

Using 37 years of data, researchers determined that the jays at Archbold are nesting earlier as a response to warmer temperatures. While early nests typically do better than later nests, there are high rates of nest failures during breeding seasons after warmer-than-normal winters. After warmer winters, even though jays nest earlier, build more nests, and lay more eggs, they have fewer fledglings.



Florida Scrub-Jay. Photo: Shelly Rozenberg



Florida Scrub-Jays may have lower nesting success after warmer winters.
Photo: Heather Martin/
Audubon Photography Awards

WHY?

The Archbold team suspects that warmer winters mean predators, especially snakes, become active earlier in the following breeding season. Because jays nest only a few meters off the ground, they are particularly vulnerable to these reptilian predators.

“The Florida Scrub-Jay population might be stable at Archbold now,” explains Archbold’s Director of Avian Ecology, Sahas Barve, PhD. “But even these are not immune to global threats such as climate change. This inspires us at Archbold to work harder to help bring more land under conservation for the jays and effectively manage habitats for the populations we have conserved.”

At Archbold, Florida Scrub-Jay first-nesting dates have advanced by roughly a week over the study period. Even though the number of nests built by each jay pair has increased by 33%, the overall number of successful fledges has declined by 25%.



Florida Scrub-Jay. Photo: Alexandra Barath



New survey results show that there are more than 1,750 family groups in Ocala National Forest. Photo: Kaitlin Marks-Dubbs/Audubon Photography Awards

What Does the Overall Florida Scrub-Jay Population Look Like? A New Update Tells Us

The FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) has just completed a statewide update of Florida Scrub-Jay population numbers on public and private lands managed for conservation. We know from Jay Watch that there is a lot of variation in how jay populations are doing at different sites. Many sites with successful habitat management programs have increasing populations, while many smaller populations in isolated habitat patches are declining. This study will help us understand how jay populations are doing at a statewide scale. Detailed results from the FWRI study will be published later this year. Results from Jay Watch were a key component of this important dataset!

Karl Miller, PhD, research scientist at FWRI, gave Audubon a summary of the newest survey data. One piece of good news is that for the first time we have a robust population estimate for Ocala National Forest and there are more jays there than we thought—over 1,750 family groups in this population.



180  **DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS**

CONTRIBUTED

 **1,800** **SURVEY HOURS** 

AT  **48 SITES**

COUNTED

231 **FAMILY GROUPS**

180 **JUVENILE JAYS**

569 **ADULT JAYS**

TOTAL JAYS **749**

Special Thanks to the 2024 Jay Watch Supporters

The Batchelor Foundation · The Mosaic Company Foundation · West Volusia Audubon Society

Join Jay Watch:

Contact Audrey DeRose-Wilson
Email flconservation@audubon.org

To Donate:

Contact Victoria Johnston
Email victoria.johnston@audubon.org

Learn More:

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