

Florida Scrub-Jay Sightings Report

BACKGROUND:

It has been an ongoing effort over the past years to verify the presence of the Florida Scrub-Jay within the city of North Port and compare the sightings to the city's "SJ" Habitat Zone Map and Parcel ID Listing. Published studies on the metapopulations and subpopulations of the Florida Scrub-Jay indicate the importance of providing "steppingstone" habitat patches within suburban landscapes which adds to the species overall sustainability. The city of North Port is unique since it has large undeveloped parcels along with several important preserve areas within these landscapes which can support and tentatively grow the population. To be successful there needs to be appropriate protections/guidelines and habitat specific land management practices in place.

The current map was updated in May 2021 in the "DeLong" area through new observation data and supporting photographic evidence submitted by Edie Driest and Debbie Blanco with subsequent verification by the city and USFWS. Due to the continued rapid development, land clearing compliance issues for protected species, climate change and insufficient protection guidelines/protocols, the Florida Scrub-Jay's habitat within our city is becoming fragmented and threatens the survivability of the species. ***The time to act is now!***

We have continued to work with the city over the years and have submitted several proposals and attended multiple meetings to provide them with the information necessary to produce a plan to implement additional guidelines/protocols for protected species: specifically, the Florida Scrub-Jay. At the city commission hearing in September 2021, the commission directed staff to verify the current "SJ" habitat zone map BEFORE they will consider implementing any additional guidelines/protocols. On October 13th, 2021, while attending the Heron Creek development "SJ" habitat management areas, we were able to talk with Acting Assistant City Manager, Julie Bellia to further discuss the commissions' directives and how we could work together to achieve them. After several recommendations, we were able to devise a plan to implement a "Florida Scrub-Jay habitat zone verification" process which Julie stated that upon completion of the verifications and subsequent review by USFWS, she would then present it to the commission. To achieve this, we had to start immediately, limiting ourselves to the "hotspots" before the "peak" survey season comes to an end on October 31, 2021.

DATA:

To ensure data integrity, all included photographs were taken by Edie Driest, Robin San Vicente and Environmental Consultant, Jennifer Krajcir of Suncoast Ecological Services, LLC. and according to the discussions and recommendations set forth by USFWS. Photo locations were mapped in Google Earth Pro and an 850' radius was drawn to represent potential territory around each sighting. It is important to note that the circle does not represent the entire territory of the Scrub-Jay family group, but that it indicates the likelihood that the Scrub-Jays are utilizing that area for nesting and foraging.

TIMELINE:

The data does not represent an exhaustive survey of North Port. However, the data was compiled with the intent to prove that the areas in the current "SJ" habitat map, utilized by the City and USFWS are still valid and being utilized by the Scrub-Jay family groups and therefore should be honored. Additionally, care should be taken to ensure no injury to nests, eggs, or unfledged young take place during the upcoming nesting season.

Florida Scrub-Jay Sightings Report

FUTURE DATA COLLECTION:

The map will be updated with each confirmed sighting and upon review of USFWS until such time as we can implement a citywide survey. The optimal time for Florida Scrub-Jay surveys ended on October 31st. Surveys outside of this timeframe will result in increased “negative” findings, as the birds are more focused on foraging and caching acorns for the winter and less focused on territory defense.

NESTING SEASON:

As stated previously, the goal of our “Florida Scrub-Jay Verification” process is to ensure no impact to the population during nesting season, March 1st through July 1st. The preference would be to delay the land clearing/underbrush of any parcels within the designated “SJ” habitat zones as clearing the parcels could destroy cached acorns and forage areas used to feed young.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Honor the existing “SJ” habitat zone map for the reasons/findings stated in this report.
- Incorporate additional guidelines/protocols which specifically protects the Florida Scrub-Jay and its’ habitat during nesting season.
- Incorporate “Underbrush” clearings into the current scrub-jay review protocols/guidelines set forth for land clearing permits for parcels that lie within the designated “SJ” habitat zones.
- Recommend that a “nesting survey” be conducted and incorporated into the existing protocols/guidelines for parcels that lie within the “SJ” habitat zone map. This short survey would include playing territorial calls from each of the corners of the parcel to determine if jays are using the parcel. If not, the parcel may be cleared within 48 hours of the negative survey. If the parcel is being used by the Scrub-Jays, clearing must wait until nesting season ends.
- Take into consideration the changing behavior patterns of the Florida Scrub-Jay that is being reflected in their territories, nesting and foraging habits because of habitat loss/fragmentation and climate change when considering additional protocols/guidelines.
- Recommend Florida Scrub-Jay “habitat specific” tree/plant protocols/guidelines within the designated “SJ” habitat zone map to ensure the health and survivability of the species.

Respectfully Submitted,



Robin J. San Vicente