

The Florida scrub-jay was listed as a Threatened Species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 1987 and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 1975. If you are planning to build on land with scrub habitat, contact these agencies to

avoid possible impacts to scrub-jays. It is unlawful to possess, harass, kill or collect this species or its nest and eggs.



### Threats

The greatest threat to scrub-jay populations is habitat loss due to residential, commercial and agricultural development. Many populations have been eliminated; others have been irreparably isolated and fragmented by urban development. Preservation of existing populations is of paramount importance, including habitat management within designated preserves. In natural areas and preserves, prescribed burning is the most critical element in the preservation of scrub habitat. The conservation of scrub-jays in Sarasota County is critical to their survival on the west coast of Florida.

Where residential areas overlap into scrub-jay territories, the jays have been found to be very tolerant of human presence. In order to accommodate the jays, landowners may provide islands of scrub oaks in their landscape. Many scrub-jays have fallen victim to domestic cats and dogs so it is important for pet owners to keep them indoors. Automobiles also pose a significant threat to scrub-jays, especially inexperienced juveniles.

### How you can help

- **Provide habitat for scrub-jays.** Plant, protect and cultivate patches of sand live oak, myrtle oak and Chapman's oak scrubs on your property. Your local Cooperative Extension Service can recommend other appropriate scrub plants to suit your landscaping needs.
- **Protect scrub-jays from your pets.** Respect leash laws in your community and protect areas being used by nesting scrub-jays from domestic animals (cats especially).
- **Restrict the use of pesticides.** Scrub-jays feed on insects usually considered pests around golf courses and homes. Pesticides may limit or contaminate food used by the jays. Reduce the use of pesticides as much as possible.
- **Report malicious destruction or harassment of scrub-jays or their nests.** Call Wildlife Alert toll-free: 888.404.3922.
- **Support the establishment of regional and local scrub-jay preserves.** The protection of scrub-jay populations on managed tracts of optimal habitat is the best means of protecting this species. Sarasota County is working to preserve and maintain scrub habitat through the establishment of a countywide Habitat Conservation Plan. Contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941.861.5000 and ask for Resource Protection to find out more information on the Habitat Conservation Plan.
- **If you are developing a lot that may be used by scrub-jays,** contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941.861.5000 and ask for Resource Protection to learn about the applicable regulations.
- **For more information on federal regulations protecting the Florida scrub-jay,** contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at 772.562.3909.

DO NOT DISTURB

# The Florida Scrub-jay

*Aphelocoma coerulescens*



A threatened species

## Identification

The Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*) is generally between 10-12 inches long. It is a cerulean blue and gray crestless jay that lacks the white wing spots and tailfeather tips of the more common blue jay. The head, nape and tail are blue, while the back and belly are pale gray. A necklace of blue feathers separates the whiter throat from the gray underparts, and a white line over the eye often blends into a whitish forehead. Males and females are similar in appearance. Juveniles can be distinguished from adults by their dusky brown heads and necks.



Adult scrub-jay



Juvenile scrub-jays



Photo by Jay Wentha

## Natural history

Scrub-jay pairs mate for life. They also raise their young in cooperative family groups, a fascinating aspect of scrub-jay family life. The family group consists of a breeding pair and their offspring, who act as helpers. Helpers assist in defending the family's territory, nest and young. However, only the breeding pair — never the helpers — participate in nest-building, incubating and brooding activities. This takes place from late February through the end of June. Long-term studies have established that breeding pairs with helpers successfully raise more young than do lone pairs.



Photo by Jay Wentha

Scrub-jays are nonmigratory birds; therefore, each family maintains a permanent territory ranging from five to 50 acres (averaging about 25 acres in native habitat, 13 acres in more developed, or suburbanized, settings). Territories increase in size as the family group grows and when the habitat is less than optimal. Scrub-jays will defend their territory from adjacent families and predators, such as hawks, snakes and domestic cats.

Scrub-jays eat a variety of animals and plants. Insects comprise a major food source during spring and summer. Scrub-jays may also prey on frogs, toads, lizards, snakes, birds' eggs and even mice. In addition, each scrub-jay harvests and buries 6,000 to 8,000 acorns from August to November for use throughout the year. We should not feed scrub-jays even though they will readily accept handouts.

## Habitat

Scrub-jays are the only bird species unique to Florida. They have specific habitat requirements, and are entirely dependent on oak scrub communities. Scrub is characterized by 3-4 species of stunted, low-growing oaks and scattered sandy clearings. Preferred scrub-jay habitat occurs when the oaks are between 3-10 feet tall, along with sandy openings and very few, scattered trees.

In Sarasota County, most scrub-jay habitat occurs on scrubby flatwoods. The largest block of suitable habitat in Sarasota County is located in Oscar Scherer State Park. Other small "islands" of scrubby flatwoods are scattered throughout the county, mainly to the south. Fire ecology is also an essential element in scrub communities. Periodic fires limit tree height and maintain the sandy clearings that scrub-jays require. Historically, wildfires maintained the natural state of scrubby flatwoods. Due to development and population growth, these habitats must now be maintained with prescribed burns every 5-15 years.



Scrub habitat