

Florida Scrub Jay

(*Aphelocoma coerulescens*)

Although rare, the Florida Scrub Jay can still be spotted in our area. Look for them in the dry oak scrub habitat at Oscar Scherer State Park (try the yellow trail) and along the Legacy Trail that runs by the park and the intercoastal waterway behind Caspersen Beach. Adult Florida Scrub Jays have blue heads, blue wings, and long blue tails with pale gray backs and bellies, dark eyes, and black beaks, legs, and feet. They are just slightly smaller than the Blue Jay (9-11" with 13-14" wing spans, compared to Blue Jays 10-12" size and 13-17 wing span.) and they lack the Blue Jay's crest and black wing markings. Males and females have the same coloring, but males are a bit larger than females. Juveniles are grayer and have a brownish head.

Florida Scrub Jays are intelligent, curious, friendly birds. They can recognize and recall individual humans as well as fellow scrub jays. They can remember past actions and attempt to anticipate future actions. Other than dolphins, Florida Scrub Jays are the only non-primate capable of planning ahead for the future. Florida Scrub Jays are omnivorous. Although their diet consists primarily of acorns, they also eat insects, nuts, seeds, and fruit during the summer as well as the occasional tree frog, snake, lizard, small animal, and even other bird's eggs. Individuals cache thousands of acorns each summer and can recall their hiding places months later when food is scarce during winter and early spring.

Florida Scrub Jays live in scattered family groups that consist of one breeding pair and one to six helper scrub jays who are usually



Florida Scrub Jay Adult

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the offspring of the pair. These helpers stay with the family for one to three years to help defend the territory and feed and raise the babies. Florida scrub jays are monogamous. If one bird of the breeding couple dies, the survivor will assume the role of helper. One of the helper male offspring will inherit the territory and build a new nest with his mate. They will become the breeding couple. There is a hierarchy among the family groups. The breeding male is the head of the family, followed by the male helpers, then by the breeding female, followed by the female helpers.

Florida Scrub Jays are very territorial. They post one or two helpers on high spots to act as sentinels. These sentinels will give a harsh call to warn the family of danger and chase any intruder away. Known predators are Cooper's hawks, sharp-skinned hawks, merlins, northern harriers, peregrine falcons, domestic and feral cats, and bobcats. Snakes and raccoons also prey on Florida Scrub Jay nests. Sometimes several family members will assist by mobbing the intruder. Family members also occasionally hunt larger prey together. They communicate with each other

using different calls and gestures. Territories are usually 22 to 25 acres but can be as small as 12.5 acres.

The Florida Scrub Jay's range is limited to spotty areas in coastal and central peninsular Florida. Here high dry areas of ancient sandy ridges and old sandy dunes support the scrub jay's needed habitat of shrubby evergreen flatwoods interspersed with bare sandy areas. It usually consists of short (less than 7 feet tall) sand oak, myrtle oak, and Chapman's oak, with or without a sparse pine canopy.

Nesting season is March 1 to June 30. Both the male and female breeding couple build a nest in a shrubby oak, about 3-6 feet off the ground. The nest is a thick-walled cup made of twigs, grasses, moss, plant roots, and palmetto fiber. The female lays 2 to 5 light green eggs with olive or brown spots. She incubates the eggs for about 18 days. The male feeds her while she is incubating the eggs. Scrub jays practice "cooperative breeding." Both parents and the helpers feed the chicks. They will usually fledge 18 to 25 days after hatching but will continue to be fed and taken care of for at least another month. Scrub jays only have one clutch per year; however, if the eggs fail early in the nesting season, the couple may reneest. Males usually stay in their natal territory and females emigrate to new territories to find a mate. The average life expectancy is 4-5 years, but Florida Scrub Jays do survive as long as 15 years in the wild.

There are ten species of jays in North America and four species of scrub jays that reside in the U.S. However, the Florida Scrub Jay is the only native bird species endemic to Florida - the only species of bird that spends its entire life cycle in Florida and is found nowhere else!

Florida Scrub Jays never migrate; they spend their entire life within miles of where they were hatched. This characteristic makes them especially vulnerable to climate change, loss of habitat, and lack of genetic diversity.



Florida Scrub Jay Juvenile

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In 2022, it was estimated that there were only between 7,700 - 9,300 Florida Scrub Jays left in the wild. This was a 90% decrease in the last century!

Florida Scrub Jays were officially listed as a threatened state species by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 1975 and as a threatened federal species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1987.

Loss of habitat poses a major threat to Florida Scrub Jays. Urban development and agricultural expansion lead to the fragmentation and degradation of scrub habitat. As we move closer to their habitat, we suppress the natural fires that keep the vegetation low and the sandy areas bare. Spotty development creates a fragmented scrub habitat.

Florida scrub jays do not like to fly over areas that are not scrub oak. Hence, families become isolated, leading to a lack of genetic diversity making them vulnerable to disease.

Conservation efforts are underway to facilitate controlled burns and create corridors between scrub habitats. The Florida Scrub Jay is an indicator species. The health of the scrub jay signals the health of the endangered scrub habitat and the other species that rely on scrub habitat such as the endemic Florida mouse, the endemic red widow spider, the endemic Florida scrub lizard, gopher tortoise, and Florida rosemary.

Submitted by Mary Jo Davis