



Audubon | FLORIDA

# Jay Watch Report

2021 ANNUAL SUMMARY



Scrub-Jays in the burned area at  
Jonathan Dickinson State Park.  
Photo: Shelly Rozenberg





**Audrey DeRose-Wilson**

This year illustrates that your help improves the resiliency of Florida Scrub-Jays. You made your voices heard advocating for critical restoration initiatives (page 3), restoration that directly results in higher jay populations. You spoke out against the M-CORES toll roads that threatened to run right through critical conservation areas, and we may need your voices again on the last gasp of a toll road extension (page 5). In another summer season impacted by COVID-19, you remained flexible and counted jay families on 46 sites (page 8).

In my new role as the Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon Florida, I am so excited to work with you all to protect Florida's only endemic bird species, and to chart a course for its survival in the face of a changing climate and increasing development pressure. Congratulations to Dr. Marianne Korosy on her well-deserved retirement — you are a true advocate for Florida's birds and special places!

Audrey DeRose-Wilson, *Director of Bird Conservation*



**Jacqui Sulek**

While it is only February, planning is already underway for the 2022 Jay Watch season! What will it look like? As we have come to learn over the past couple of years, time will tell. But judging from the energy at the November Jay Watch appreciation event it will be a robust and exciting time. First-time interest in Jay Watch continues to grow and seasoned Jay Watchers are hungry for more experience. The Audubon Jay Watch Facebook page not only gives us a regular glimpse into the lives of our (dare I say) favorite bird but also showcases a growing

community of amazing jay photographers, several featured in this report.

As the Jay Watch community continues to grow, the work you all do informs land managers, scientists, and decisionmakers. You all should be proud. And, while the birds cannot speak, perhaps you will take each young Florida Scrub-Jay you discover as the ultimate thank you.

To all the Audubon Jay Watchers and partners, thank you and hope to see you in the scrub!

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



Photo: Shelly Rozenberg



# Florida Scrub-Jay Advocates Defend Restoration Plans in Brevard County

In Brevard County, a group of recreational mountain bikers have been opposing the much-needed ecological restoration of Malabar Scrub Sanctuary. Restoration is a matter of survival for this area's scrub-jays, and Brevard County Jay Watcher and Space Coast Audubon member Vince Lamb rallied advocates to lend jays their voices at the Brevard County Commission meeting in January.

Florida Scrub-Jays have evolved to live in Florida scrub habitat which historically burned every few years as a result of lightning-ignited fires. This frequent fire is renewing for the jays' habitat, ensuring the open sandy patches they depend upon remain clear and canopy trees do not encroach upon the habitat, making it inviable for the jays. With the development of Florida, roads and other converted areas interrupted the ability of fire to sweep across the landscape. Where fire does ignite naturally, humans quickly extinguish it for the safety of our communities. Dr. David Breininger and Dr. Robert Lacy have produced a population viability assessment showing how these populations are at risk.

Many of the remaining scrub tracts have become overgrown, resulting in a cruel irony: Even if they are protected from development as parks or preserves,



Florida Scrub-Jays need the right habitat to survive and thrive. Your voice in support of restoration in Brevard County means jays can continue to live at Malabar Scrub Sanctuary. Photo: John Wolaver

the jays cannot thrive on them. Without proper maintenance, the abundance of fuel makes these areas a greater wildfire risk to human neighbors and also puts the birds at risk of predation by hawks.

Audubon Florida and Space Coast Audubon submitted a letter in support of Brevard County's Environmentally Endangered Lands program staff in their efforts to restore open habitat the jays need at the Sanctuary using both mechanical tree removal and prescribed fire. At the meeting, after listening to the jay advocates, the commissioners withdrew a motion to have the town manage the Sanctuary and further voted to support restoration.

Thank you to those who acted in defense of this vulnerable species. With the continued advocacy of Vince and his fellow Brevard County Jay Watchers, we are hopeful the sanctuary's restoration will begin this year.

## Reed Bowman Recognized with Statewide Guy Bradley Award

Guy Bradley was an Audubon Warden in the Everglades who was murdered by wading bird poachers in 1905. His death galvanized the conservation movement, eventually resulting in the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Each year, Audubon Florida recognizes an individual for their contributions to bird conservation with an award in Guy Bradley's honor.



Audubon selected Reed Bowman to receive the Guy Bradley Award for his life's work growing our understanding of some of Florida's most imperiled bird

species, guiding their conservation, and training the next generation of researchers.

Bowman's career at Archbold Biological station has generated the strong science needed to understand and protect Florida's only endemic bird species, the Florida Scrub-Jay. He pioneered ground-breaking studies on fire, cooperative breeding behavior, interactions between jay groups, dominance hierarchies, prey base, and so much more. He has been instrumental in the captive breeding and reintroduction of critically endangered Florida Grasshopper Sparrows, and has mentored countless graduate students who now are advancing conservation science across the country.

**Learn more about Reed and watch his acceptance speech:**  
[fl.audubon.org/reed-bowman-award](https://fl.audubon.org/reed-bowman-award)



Volunteers are the lifeblood of the Jay Watch program. We loved that we could come together in 2021 to thank you for your efforts! Photo: Shelly Rozenberg



Are you interested in sharing a copy of the Audubon Adventures series featuring jays? Let us know at [flconservation@audubon.org](mailto:flconservation@audubon.org)!

## 2021 Jay Watch Volunteer Appreciation Event

The Jay Watch Appreciation event was extra special this year. After two seasons of online trainings and modified surveys, 60 enthusiastic volunteers gathered at Highlands Hammock State Park for a day of learning and celebration, hosted by Highlands Hammock State Park, Highlands County Audubon, and Audubon Florida.

Led by park staff, the day began early with a field trip to an area restored with the help of Jay Watch volunteers. The park's Recreation Center provided a perfect meeting space, with plenty of room for masked social distancing.

The day-long event featured an overview of Audubon Jay Watch survey results combined with several educational presentations. Audrey DeRose-Wilson, Audubon Florida's Director of Bird Conservation, gave an overview of current population trends at some of the larger sites. Educational presentations included results of field work by Alexis Cardas on the *Impacts of Translocation on the Cooperatively Breeding Florida Scrub-Jay in Ocala National Forest*, as well as a success story by Matt Vance, Lead Area Biologist for the FWC's Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area, entitled *Burn It and They Will Come! Restoration Success at Carter Creek*.

We celebrated the unveiling of the new Florida Scrub-Jay Audubon Adventures, the first single species example of the well-known National Audubon Society Adventures series. The three-page fold out is designed for grades 3-5, and the delightful centerfold illustration — by Apalachee Audubon member and illustrator extraordinaire Natasza Fontaine — and informative text appeals to all ages. This collaboration between Audubon Florida and National Audubon Society is the first of its kind and 15,000 copies will be distributed to parks and chapters around the state.

The day would not have been complete without the Jay Watch cake, a custom printed Jay Watch t-shirt (designed by Audrey), and a fabulous line-up of door prizes, including hand-painted Florida Scrub-Jay ornaments and a dozen bottles of Florida Scrub-Jay Lemon Wheat Ale courtesy of Playalinda Brewery, bottled specially for Audubon!

The day felt like a reunion, a coming together of folks with a shared passion and experience. It was clear that people left recharged and recommitted to Jay Watch as we continue to work towards a resilient future for this charismatic bird.



Photo: Vince Lamb



# M-CORES Proposal Could Still Threaten Florida Scrub-Jays

In 2021, the Florida Legislature passed Senate Bill 100 to repeal the 2019 M-CORES toll road mandate that ordered the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to begin construction on three new turnpikes in 2023 that would have been a disaster for Florida Scrub-Jay populations.

During the consideration of the initial M-CORES legislation, Audubon advocated for an amendment requiring the formation and input of Task Forces for each of the three prospective turnpikes. The paths of these new roads would have opened large parts of remaining rural Florida to development, and potentially destroyed important conservation lands and wildlife habitats. The huge cost of these new roads could have drained Florida's transportation funds away from locations where road improvements are truly needed.

Audubon's Paul Gray, PhD, Everglades Science Coordinator, served on the Central-Southwest Corridor Task Force, and Charles Lee, Director of Advocacy, served on task forces for the Northern Turnpike and Suncoast extensions.

In its repeal of the M-CORES turnpikes the Florida Legislature did not stop FDOT's normal process of evaluating possible future road proposals. The last section of SB 100 asked FDOT to commence a study (but with no turnpike building construction mandate) of a possible extension of the Florida Turnpike from its current terminus in Wildwood. This extension could have negative impacts on Florida Scrub-Jay populations in its path.

FDOT must present a report to the Legislature and the Governor by December 31, 2022. The study is completely open-ended, and unlike M-CORES, the study requested does not even designate a specific destination for a turnpike extension; it merely asks FDOT to explore the possibility of extending the turnpike to "a logical and appropriate terminus."

Audubon anticipated that such a study may lead to an ill-advised future road project, and advocated for additional protections in the bill. As a result, SB 100 requires the agency to apply the recommendations of the M-CORES Task Forces to the new study.

The Task Forces' recommendations strongly support expanding existing roads rather than building new turnpikes, as well as insist that conservation lands and other important environmental assets be avoided. The Task Force recommendations also say that FDOT should respect local governments' land use plans when studying any future toll road. The Legislature then amplified the Task Force recommendations by writing one of them — avoidance of conservation lands — directly into the paragraph authorizing the new study.

Still, concerning road projects remain. Additional public meetings and hearings will take place in the summer of 2022 and into the fall or winter months.

**There are multiple opportunities to weigh in —  
stay up-to-date by following Audubon's Advocate newsletter:  
[fl.audubon.org/keep-touch](https://fl.audubon.org/keep-touch)**

**Expanding toll rolls into Florida Scrub-Jay habitat  
could further bisect critical habitat areas this endemic  
species needs to survive. Photo: Pam Moran**



# Jay Watch Needs Your Support!

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If you are 70 ½ years old or older, you can make a tax-free distribution from your traditional or Roth IRA to Audubon. The process is simple: you direct distributions in the amount of your choosing from your traditional or Roth IRA to Audubon. The distributions go directly to Audubon and are not subject to federal income tax.

Please contact Rosa Rivera at  
[rosa.rivera@audubon.org](mailto:rosa.rivera@audubon.org)  
or 904.238.0577  
if you are interested in learning how  
your gift can support Jay Watch.



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



# THANK YOU!

## Happy 10 Years of Jay Watch at Audubon Florida, and 20 Years Total!

This year, Jay Watch turns 20 years old — it is Audubon's 10th year coordinating this essential program! Why is Jay Watch so important? Just ask Todd Mecklenborg, biologist for the US Fish and Wildlife Service:

“The Jay Watch data is an outstanding resource that the Service has come to rely on over the years. Many of the managed public lands do not have sufficient staff to perform regular surveys for Florida Scrub-Jay due to constraints with employee availability or budget shortfalls and priorities. Having the annual data provides population trends for many of the local populations within our ‘focal landscape’ areas that provide metrics for our species recovery efforts.”  
— Todd Mecklenborg, Biologist for the US Fish and Wildlife Service



At the end of 2021, Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) students joined our climate team and local tour guide David Simpson on a field trip to Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Audubon Florida's CLI students participate in a year-long experiential learning program that provides opportunities for undergraduate college students to immerse themselves in Audubon, strengthen leadership skills, and gain an understanding of career options in the conservation field. They saw several

pairs of Florida Scrub-Jays, as well as Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbills, and learned about the various plant communities in the park and the habitat they provide for birds. In addition, they learned how climate impacts both native birds and our communities and how they can advocate for climate solutions grounded in sound science. Following the morning hike, the group visited Playalinda Brewing Co. to have lunch and try the special release Scrub-Jay Lemon Wheat Beer.



**60**   
**DEDICATED  
VOLUNTEERS**  
**CONTRIBUTED**

 **674** **SURVEY  
HOURS** 

**AT**  **46 SITES**

**COUNTED**

**210** **FAMILY GROUPS**

**183** **JUVENILE JAYS**

**535** **ADULT JAYS**

**TOTAL JAYS**

**718**



## Special Thanks to the 2021 Jay Watch Supporters

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## FLORIDA SCRUB-JAYS NEED YOU!

With 46 sites continually monitored by dedicated Jay Watch community scientists each season, we are learning a lot about jays' efforts to persist in their home state. This important data informs management decisions that can help, or hinder, growth of scrub-jay populations. Without your support, the data that is collected remains only numbers. We need your help to ensure those numbers translate into dollars that can help leverage more support for Florida Scrub-Jays and scrub habitat protection.



### Join Jay Watch:

Contact Jacqui Sulek  
Email [jacqui.sulek@audubon.org](mailto:jacqui.sulek@audubon.org)

### To Donate:

Contact Alison Niescier  
Email [alison.niescier@audubon.org](mailto:alison.niescier@audubon.org)

### Learn More:

[AudubonJayWatch.org](http://AudubonJayWatch.org)