



Audubon | FLORIDA

Jay Watch Report

2025 ANNUAL SUMMARY



Florida Scrub-Jay.
Photo: Michael Dreese/Audubon Photography Awards

25 Years of Jay Watch People, Partnerships, and Florida Scrub-Jays

25
years



Florida Scrub-Jay at Ocala National Forest.
Photo: Cayla Romano/Audubon Photography Awards

This year marks a milestone for Jay Watch: 25 years of volunteers, land managers, scientists, and conservationists coming together to monitor and protect one of Florida's only endemic bird species, the Florida Scrub-Jay. What began as a small, collaborative effort at just 13 sites has grown into a statewide community science program monitoring more than 45 scrub-jay populations across 19 counties.

FROM THE LAKE WALES RIDGE TO A STATEWIDE PROGRAM

Jay Watch began as a collaborative effort of the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Working Group, created to ensure land managers had the data to effectively manage scrub habitat for healthy Florida Scrub-Jay populations. Under the leadership of Cheryl Millett and fueled by dedicated volunteers and partners, the program expanded, eventually covering the entire range of the Florida Scrub-Jay.

"I was drawn by the dedicated volunteers and land managers along the Lake Wales Ridge who spent time in the heat of summer monitoring these federally threatened and endlessly charismatic birds, providing those land managers the information they needed," said Cheryl Millett, who led Jay Watch until 2010.

Following years of coordination by The Nature Conservancy and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Audubon Florida assumed leadership of Jay Watch, continuing to build the program while strengthening partnerships with state and federal agencies, researchers, and land managers.

A MANAGEMENT TOOL IN ACTION

Jay Watch provides consistent annual survey data to land managers at scrub-jay sites where staffing and budgets would otherwise limit the ability to conduct regular surveys.

Jay Watch survey data can also direct resources to where they are most needed.

DATA FOR RECOVERY AND RESEARCH

Over 25 years, Jay Watch has become a trusted source of long-term data used by both managers and scientists.

"The Jay Watch data is an outstanding resource that the Service has come to rely on over the years," said Todd Mecklenborg, Biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Having the annual data provides population trends and metrics for our species recovery efforts."

THE HEART OF JAY WATCH: VOLUNTEERS

At the core of Jay Watch are the volunteers who return year after year, building familiarity with their sites, their birds, and each other. Their motivations are as varied as the scrub habitats they survey, but a common thread runs through them: joy, responsibility, and purpose.

"It is a way to help a species not go extinct," volunteer Lynn Simmons shared. "There is a chance to see other wildlife when counting jays and it's just fun!"

As much as volunteers get out of the program, their contributions amount to far more. "Our volunteer network distributed thousands of copies of Audubon Adventures featuring the Florida-Scrub Jay to Audubon chapters, classrooms, and nature centers, building a community for conservation" said Jacqui Sulek, former Jay Watch coordinator.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

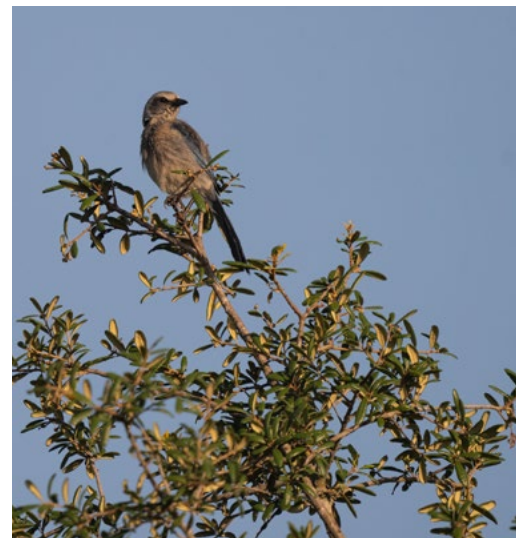
25 years in, Jay Watch shows the impact people can have when work together. The data tell an important story. But the relationships behind Jay Watch are what makes it impactful.



"Jay Watch is a long-term commitment based on strong partnerships and people working together for wildlife. As we look ahead, Jay Watch will continue to guide management, inform recovery, and inspire the next generation of conservation stewards."

— Audrey DeRose-Wilson, Director of Bird Conservation





National Audubon Society's Network Photographer Sydney Walsh visited the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway to see Jay Watchers in action. Her beautiful images not only capture the iconic Florida Scrub-Jay, but also its vulnerable scrub habitat and the dedicated volunteers who make this population monitoring possible.

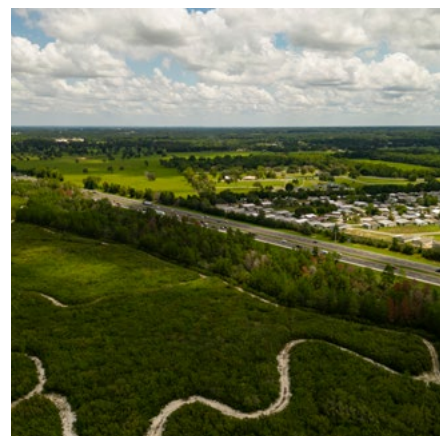
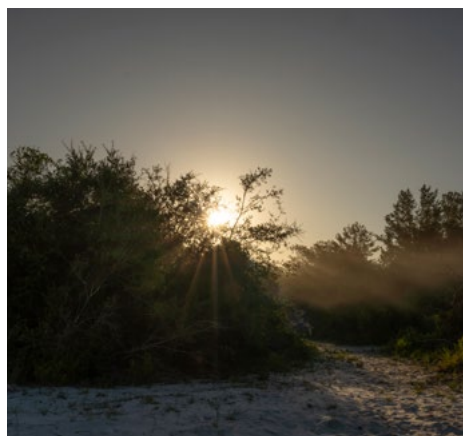


Photo: Claire Herzog/Audubon
Photography Awards



Conservation Lands Highlight: Water Management Districts

Each year, Jay Watch partners with the South Florida, Southwest Florida, and St. Johns water management districts to count Florida Scrub-Jays on their properties. These protected lands form a critical part of the connected web of jay habitat, and have a unique management and funding structure.

WHAT ARE WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICTS?

In 1972, with advocacy from Audubon and other conservation organizations, the Florida Legislature passed the Water Resources Act, considered by many scholars of the time as one of the most forward-looking and comprehensive water laws in the nation. It established unequivocally that all water in Florida, on the surface or in the ground, on public or private property, is a public resource. The act created Florida's five modern-day water management districts, organized by watersheds rather than political boundaries, and tasked them, along with the Department of Environmental Protection, with managing water as a public trust on behalf of all the people of Florida, not just a privileged few.

Water management districts are funded with ad valorem taxes on property values. This was particularly elegant because as landscapes are subdivided and urbanized, they have more complex needs for water supply, flood control, and natural resource protection—which are more expensive. As properties are subdivided and upzoned (from agriculture to residential, for example), their taxable value per acre increases—allowing the ad valorem revenue generated to keep pace with the increasing costs of providing them with water management.



Photo: Steven Chu/Audubon
Photography Awards



Photo: Kaylyn Stein/Audubon
Photography Awards

JAY WATCH ON ST JOHNS RIVER WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT CONSERVATION LANDS

Buck Lake Conservation Area in Brevard County

After years of decline, 2025 is the fourth year in a row that jays here have seen an uptick in population numbers.

Lake Monroe Conservation Area in Volusia County

While this site has a small population with just a few family groups, they usually produce young, including this year!

JAY WATCH ON SOUTHWEST FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT CONSERVATION LANDS

Halpata Tastanaki Nature Preserve in Marion County

Fewer than 10 adults were counted in 2025—the population here continues to decline.

Edward W. Change Reserve at Gilley Creek in Manatee County

The site averages three to five family groups with one fledged chick per family per year.

Little Manatee River Southfork Tract in Manatee County

Great news! Jays were detected here in 2025 for the first time since 2020. Jay Watchers recorded two to four family groups. This site has historically supported up to five family groups and produced seven juveniles in 2011.

Potts Preserve in Citrus County

One or two family groups are consistently spotted here. A juvenile successfully fledged in 2025.

JAY WATCH ON SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT CONSERVATION LANDS

Lake Marion Creek in Polk County

Jay Watchers recorded three family groups with seven adults and one juvenile in 2025.



Photo: Kim Norris/Audubon
Photography Awards





Lyonia Preserve Volunteer Celebration, November 8, 2025

In early November, 50 Jay Watch volunteers gathered to celebrate another great year of the Jay Watch program! The event, hosted by Audubon Florida with support from Lyonia Preserve and West Volusia Audubon, highlighted cutting-edge research and restoration tactics for a more resilient future for Florida Scrub-Jays, while providing an opportunity for jay enthusiasts to meet each other and mingle.

FIELD TRIP

During an early morning jay walk led by West Volusia Audubon Vice President Stephen Kintner, volunteers hit the trails and were delighted to see some of Lyonia Preserve's most charismatic inhabitants—curious groups of Florida Scrub-Jays. Many volunteers graciously provided delicious snacks to accompany the generous coffee donation from Starbucks. The sense of community amongst volunteers was apparent as Jay Watchers took a few moments to gather and catch up.

MEET AND GREETs

Lyonia Environmental Center Manager Christie Miller provided a warm welcome to volunteers new and old. There was also an opportunity to meet the newest member of the Audubon Jay Watch team, Carrie Mohanna, who assists with the coordination of program activities.



Carrie Mohanna

Florida Scrub-Jay
Photo: Heather
Martin



Stephen Kintner (second from left) leads volunteers on a jay walk to kick off the celebration.
Photo: Paul Strauss/Jay Watch volunteer



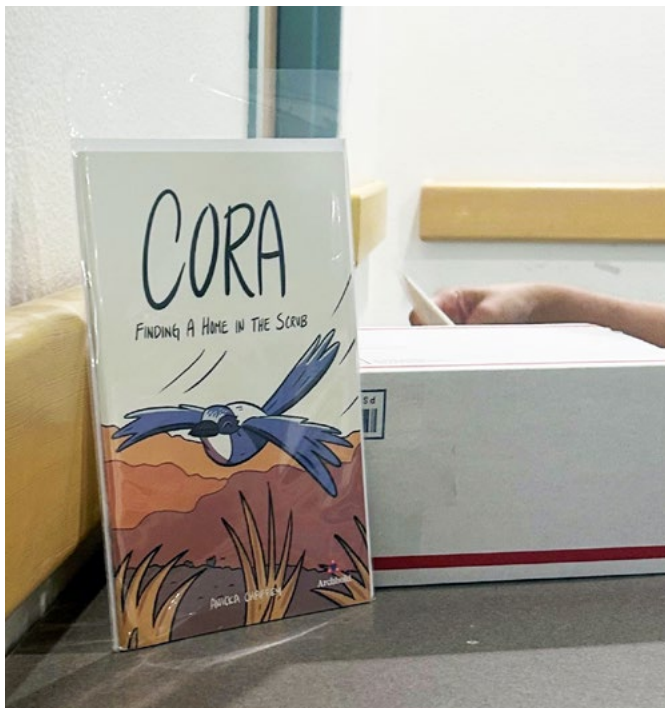
RESEARCH AND OUTREACH

Audrey DeRose-Wilson, Audubon Florida's director of bird conservation, facilitated an in-depth look at Florida Scrub-Jays from a variety of viewpoints:

- Wildlife Biologist Mike Legare spoke about the population at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and land management activities.
- DeRose-Wilson provided a recap of the 2025 statewide results, data, and Jay Watch season. After quite a few years of surveys with no birds, the Southfork Tract almost wasn't surveyed this year. After hearing from Southwest Florida Water Management District staff that jays had returned, Jennifer Callaghan with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission led a Jay Watch survey, and confirmed that jays were back, with two family groups detected. The habitat has looked good at this site for a while, so hopefully these jays raise young next year.



- Volunteers explored the intersection of comics and conservation through the eyes of Annicka Chaffey. As an artist and science communicator, Chaffey recently produced a comic book in collaboration with the avian ecology and education programs at Archbold Biological Station. *Cora: Finding a Home in the Scrub* is a story that educates middle schoolers about the Florida Scrub-Jay.



Thank you to all the volunteers who attended, brought delicious treats to share, carried food, cleaned up, shared photos, and helped to make the event a great success! Next time you are hanging out with a Jay Watcher, keep an eye out for the t-shirts created by Oskar Garcia, a University of Florida student who volunteered his time and talent to create the stunning design. As a small token of thanks, each volunteer at the event walked out with a nice new addition to their survey wardrobe!



210  **DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS**

CONTRIBUTED

 **2,000** **SURVEY HOURS** 

AT



47 SITES

COUNTED

188 **FAMILY GROUPS**

148 **JUVENILE JAYS**

477 **ADULT JAYS**

TOTAL JAYS 624



Special Thanks to the 2025 Jay Watch Supporters

The Batchelor Foundation · West Volusia Audubon Society

Join Jay Watch:

Contact Audrey DeRose-Wilson

Email audrey.derosewilson@audubon.org

To Donate:

Contact Victoria Johnston

Email victoria.johnston@audubon.org

Learn More:

AudubonJayWatch.org



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999 Ponce de Leon, Suite 555, Coral Gables, FL 33134 USA | 305.371.6399
audubon.org/florida