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Florida Scrub-Jay Surveys

If you have any scrub-jays in your yard at this time of year you may have noticed some have heads that are brown, instead of their typical blue. These brown-headed scrub-jays are the young of this year and you can see them flying around and begging their parents for food. This distinctive plumage allows scientists at Archbold Biological Station to distinguish between adults and juveniles. Dr. Angela Tringali, biologist at Archbold Biological Station says, “Being able to tell juvenile and adult Florida Scrub-Jays apart is important because it tells us if the breeding season has been successful. At Archbold, where the scrub-jays are individually marked and monitored, we already have that information. But at places where the scrub-jays are not monitored year-round, counting the jays at this time of year gives us important information about how well each family-group is reproducing.”

In July, biologists from Archbold’s Avian Ecology Program survey scrub sites on lands managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission along the Lake Wales Ridge for scrub-jays. These lands are known as the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area. Matt Vance, Lead Area Biologist with the Commission says, “These surveys allow us to assess our habitat management. If the scrub-jays are doing well and have lots of young, we know the habitat is in good condition for them. If there are fewer groups than last year or fewer young, it might indicate that we need to adjust how we are managing.”

“We care so much about how the scrub-jays are responding not only because they are a threatened species,” explains Mr. Vance, “but because the habitat needs of Florida Scrub-Jays overlap with the needs of many other plants and animals. Animals as different as Gopher

Tortoises and Bobwhite Quail have similar habitat needs to the scrub-jay. So when the habitat is managed with scrub-jays in mind other plants and animals in the scrub can thrive.”

“Last year was an excellent year for scrub-jays living in the Lake Placid Scrub (the lands south of the Placid Lakes Estates subdivision and north of State Road 70),” reports Dr. Tringali. “In fact it was the most productive year there since 2011. Across the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area the number of juveniles in each group was higher than a typical year, indicating that it was a good breeding season for scrub-jays throughout our region.”

“We have been surveying Florida Scrub-Jays throughout the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area since 1995,” says Dr. Reed Bowman, Director of the Avian Ecology Program. “The sites include natural areas and some surrounded by suburbs and agriculture. These repeated surveys give us important information about how jay populations fare in different habitats types, helping us to provide management recommendations specific to each.”

This year’s Avian Ecology Program research interns are looking forward to helping complete these surveys. “I like being involved in collecting data used to make management decisions that benefit scrub-jays and other animals,” says intern Heather Kenny. “These surveys are a chance to see scrub-jays on other sites, so we can learn how scrub-jays are doing all along the Lake Wales Ridge, and not only at Archbold Biological Station,” adds intern David Sherer.

Next time you see a family of scrub-jays, look carefully at their heads. Do you see any brown-headed juveniles among the adults? “In addition to brown heads, juveniles have some pink around the corners and inside of their mouth. This is very visible when they beg for food, making a crying noise and fluttering extended wings,” says Tringali. She adds, “Watching the juveniles as they learn to find and bury acorns in the sand to eat later is a real treat, one I hope all the residents of Highlands County get to enjoy for years to come.”

To learn more about Archbold Biological Station please visit: www.archbold-station.org.

Photo 1: An adult Florida Scrub-Jay. Photo by Florida Fish and Wildlife.



Photo 2: David Scherer, Avian Ecology Research intern, surveys a Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area site for Florida Scrub-Jays. Photo by Heather Kenny.



Photo 3: A juvenile Florida Scrub-Jay, notice the brown, rather than blue, head and pink gape. Photo by Reed Bowman.

