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Into Archbold

By Guest Writer Rick Anderson

Jennifer Brown's attention to the rolling landscape of the Lake Wales Ridge happened during one of her first trips to Highlands County. Her companion pointed out the barely noticeable rise ahead on a drive up Old State Road 8 in Venus. "My eyes were quickly trained to notice this subtle topography of the Ridge", said Brown, a nature documentary filmmaker living and working in Venus since 2012. She said, "I began to understand that this part of Florida was different and learning how different became my journey."

"As a biologist turned documentary filmmaker, I moved to Highlands County after working in Everglades National Park for five years. I started my own company 'Into Nature Films' down the road and ridge from the world-renowned Archbold Biological Station. I met Archbold's exuberant Executive Director, Dr. Hilary Swain, at an Archbold public event in 2013. At that first meeting, Hilary agreed enthusiastically to a volunteer collaboration with Archbold on an educational film about the Florida Scrub-Jay."

Brown continued, "I began exploring the Florida scrub and Florida Scrub-Jay for our film 'At Home in the Florida Scrub' (<https://vimeo.com/116419065>). In the sugar sands of the Ridge, my hurried pace slowed to a crawl. My first scrub-jay encounter felt surreal, like seeing a celebrity in person. There they were, finally, after hearing about this emblem of the scrub for so long. Brash, boisterous, and blue, the family group perched on a dead pine tree. I joined Dr. Reed Bowman, Archbold Avian Ecologist, in the early morning scrub. One by one, Reed and his capable interns captured, measured, and banded the inquisitive corvids. Reed removed an unfortunate cactus spine from one jay before releasing into the surrounding fire-maintained, beautiful scrub. I was beginning to appreciate the perks of collaborating on film projects with Archbold." In 1941, Richard Archbold founded the Station dedicated to scientific study of a

little-known and underappreciated ecosystem, the Florida scrub. Brown continued, “Our film translated science highlights from Archbold’s 50-year long-term study of the Florida Scrub-Jay. This was the first of many projects my company Into Nature Films produced with Archbold. Each film project deepens my appreciation of the Florida scrub while showing the world the fascinating natural history of our area.”

On New Years Day 2016 while waiting to film a Gopher Tortoise emerging from his sandy burrow, Brown spotted and filmed a tiny jumping spider living on a Scrub Palmetto. She learned from Dr. Mark Deyrup, Archbold Entomologist, this charismatic creature was a female Regal Jumping Spider. The next day, Brown posted ‘The Jumping Spider Spectacular’ on the Into Nature Films Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/IntoNatureFilms/videos/1703605376518489>).

She was surprised with over 46,000 views from around the world. The video had more impact that she had hoped. Many viewers that commented their perception of spiders changed from fear to love because of the video. Into Nature Films aims to represent nature with respect and show people as part of nature. In the rural heart of Florida, there are many stories of people and the natural world living side by side in different ways.

Into Nature Films (www.IntoNatureFilms.org) makes short films featuring the wonders of our region. Through her films, Brown hopes to move people to seek out their own experiences with nature. Here in Florida’s heartland, there are many opportunities for this local documentary filmmaker’s hopes to become reality.

After countless hours of filming, walking up, down, and around Archbold and throughout the Lake Wales Ridge, Brown appreciates the rhythm of this special landscape: spring Prickly Pear blossoms; summer rains; fires essential to the low and open scrub; beautiful regeneration after a fire; fall Purple Blazing Stars; Florida Scrub-Jays caching oak acorns for winter survival; endless streams of passionate scientists at Archbold.

Brown said, “Driving around the ridge today will give you a greater sense of what is lost, what has been saved, and what Archbold has achieved. In Highlands County, we are fortunate to live where one can enjoy some of the world’s rarest natural areas.”

Photo 1: Jennifer Brown filming Dustin Angell, Archbold Education Coordinator, for 'At Home in the Florida Scrub' at Archbold. Photo by Jennifer Brown



Photo 2: Jennifer Brown filming Archbold staff at the Avon Park Air Force Range. Photo by Emily Angell.



Photo 3: 'The Jumping Spider Spectacular'. Photo by Jennifer Brown.

