FLORIDA SCRUB-JAY
Aphelocoma coerulescens

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Corvidae
FNAI Ranks: G2/S2
U.S. Status: Threatened
FL Status: Threatened

Description: Similar in size and shape to the familiar blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*). Crestless head, nape, wings, and tail are pale blue, and the back and belly pale gray. Juveniles have fluffy brown heads.

Similar Species: The scrub-jay lacks the crest and white spotting on wings and tail that are characteristic of the blue jay.

Habitat: Inhabits fire-dominated, low-growing, oak scrub habitat found on well-drained sandy soils. May persist in areas with sparser oaks or scrub areas that are overgrown, but at much lower densities and with reduced survivorship.

Seasonal Occurrence: Extremely sedentary.

Florida Distribution: Restricted to peninsular Florida, with the largest populations occurring in Brevard, Highlands, Polk, and Marion counties.

Range-wide Distribution: Same as Florida distribution.

Conservation Status: Recognized in 1995 as a distinct species from the scrub-jays in the western U.S., making it the only bird species whose entire range is restricted to Florida. Continuing loss, fragmentation, and degradation of scrub habitat has resulted in a decline of greater than 90 percent of the original pre-settlement population of Florida scrub-jays. Precipitous decline since the 1980s. A 1992 range-wide estimate gives an overall population of approximately 10,000 birds. Largest populations are found on federal lands (Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and Ocala National Forest), but are declining. Land management practices on these lands are of concern. Smaller populations are found scattered along Lake Wales Ridge in Polk and Highlands counties, with a major protected population at Archbold Biological Station. Cars and cats take a toll on scrub-jays in developed areas. Scrub-jays are susceptible to population crashes because of catastrophic fires or disease, so protection of additional secure populations is essential.

Protection and Management: Continued existence of this species will depend on the preservation and long-term management of suitable scrub habitat. Prescribed fire every 8 - 15 years that burns patchily, where few territories are burned completely, is optimal. Mechanical treatments, at least initially, may be required where fire cannot be used, although the long-term effects of this management practice are unknown.

References: Fitzpatrick et al. 1991, Poole and Gill (eds.) 1996, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Rodgers et al. (eds.) 1996, Stevenson and Anderson 1994, Thaxton and Hingtgen 1996.

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Juvenile. © Robert Gundy