

Close call
Tampa Catholic
slips past Sebring.
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See dwindling scrub-jays up-close during nature walk

Viewers can catch glimpse of birds
at Archbold Biological Station

Highlands Today staff report

LAKE PLACID — For several decades, researchers at Archbold Biological Station have been banding in their study area scrub-jay nestlings and every month doing a census of the banded birds.

Some of the scrub-jay families they've been studying go back many generations. The study, which began 46 years ago, is one of the longest running bird-population studies in the United States, and residents are invited Saturday to take a walk in a scrub-jay habitat with Archbold's leading

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HIGHLANDS TODAY FILE PHOTO

A scrub-jay stands on a shrub at Archbold Biological Station in 2012.

Walk

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HIGHLANDS TODAY FILE PHOTO

Shane Pruett attaches a leg band to a baby scrub-jay at Archbold Biological Station in 2012.

avian researcher, who has been studying the jays for 24 years.

"It's close to nesting season and we should see lots of interesting behavior although there is never any guarantee that the jays will appear, even when you are in their home domain," said Reed Bowman, avian ecologist and director of the Avian Ecology Program at Archbold.

The walk begins at 8:30 a.m. and will last for about 90 minutes.

According to its last count, Archbold had around 120 scrub-jay families, or about 300 to 360 birds, one of the highest numbers of the dwindling birds in a nature preserve.

Bowman, who holds the scrub-jay walk once a year, said the focus is showing people how essential scrub habitat is to the survival of the bird, which is native to central Florida.

"A lot of people around the county and the state have seen the jays in other forms of habitat," he said. "We want to emphasize how important scrub habitat is to the jays."



The "brash, bolsterous and blue, iconic bird," is also the focus of a 20-minute long video, which explains why the federally threatened bird's numbers have declined during the last 20 years and its unique relationship with the low, open oak scrub habitat it calls home.

At "Home in the Florida Scrub," takes folks on a "fun tour" of life in the scrub and can be accessed by going to the Archbold website, archbold-station.org.

"The Florida Scrub-Jay will fascinate you with its tales of fire, hidden acorns and island history," begins the video, narrated by Archbold's education coordinator, Dustin Angell.

Venus-based filmmaker Jennifer Brown of Into Nature Films, "translated" decades of Archbold

science, creating unique perspectives along with humor, time-lapses, rich sounds, screen trivia and stories to "increase wonder" for the scrub-jay and Florida scrub, Archbold said in a news release.

"This is a science education film with universal appeal, suitable for everyone from elementary school students to scientists," Brown added. "Archbold scientists and interns worked with biologists from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, University of Memphis and others from around the world to bring this film to life."

"We have had terrific and unexpected feedback and seem to be creating a new fan base," Angell said. "A class of second-graders from Wisconsin discovered our film and wrote comments about 'how the scrub looks so different, the pretty birds, and fire (prescribed burns) are cool.'"



The video offers interesting glimpses of the bird and its behavior, which may surprise even longtime residents who may have heard general tidbits about scrub-jays without knowing some of their more eyebrow-raising mannerisms.

Turns out, the family groups live in designated areas, and most scrub jays don't fly more than a mile or so from their parents' territory.

They raise their young through cooperative breeding, where more than two jays provide care in rearing the young from one nest.

"About 3 percent (approximately 300 species)

of bird species worldwide are cooperative breeders," according to a Stanford University essay.

The jays are omnivores and eat acorns, insects, and lizards or mice smaller than them, among other things.

Their sophisticated "food storage" expertise is particularly noteworthy. Since acorns are only available in the fall, the jays actually squirrel away thousands of the valuable nuts in the sand in the fall for winter snacking later on.

They bury them individually in the white, sugar sand and come back six months later to dig up their subterranean stash. One scrub-jay could cache up to 8,000 acorns one fall. The jays have preferred storage spots and also some sort of spatial memory that helps them relocate the acorns, Bowman explained.

While the scrub-jays' story is inextricably tied to its unique, fire-dependent scrub habitat, a crucial element that ties the two and the scrub-jay's survival is fire. Fire cleaned out overgrowth in ancient forests through forest fires and is managed today through prescribed burns.

Without the proper fire management of land, scrub-jay numbers continue to decline, Bowman said. Even if we protect the land, not burning it in a way that is consistent with what jays want does not help in bolstering their numbers, he added.

Archbold Biological Station is 8 miles south of Lake Placid. The entrance is 1.8 miles south of State Road 70 on Old State Road 8. Go to archbold-station.org, or call (863) 465-2571.