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Archbold bids farewell to Michelle Dent

Archbold Biological Station

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Michelle Dent and the cake and cupcakes she baked to celebrate Archbold Biological Station's 75th anniversary.

DUSTIN ANGELL PHOTO

There may be few people who know the back roads and trails of Avon Park Air Force Range (APAFR) as well as Michelle Dent. For the last 21 years, Michelle led the monitoring program for Florida Scrub-Jays at APAFR. With only the help of a few seasonal assistants, Michelle trapped and banded all the jays, searched, and found all their nests, and watched the young birds fledge and find mates of their own. She has a genealogist's knowledge of the jay's families and lineages — and she cares for their welfare like a doting grandmother.

In a recent interview, Michelle admitted that she did not know jobs like hers existed until after college. She received her BA in Sociology from Principia College in 1992 and worked in related fields until 1997. That summer she interned with the Zoological Society of Milwaukee County monitoring grassland birds, including searching for their nests. Her love of natural history was now fully uncorked and realizing that careers were available in this field, she applied for additional internships.

She arrived at Archbold Biological Station in 1998, working with Dr. Reed Bowman, Director of Archbold's Avian Ecology Program on his long-term study of Florida Scrub-Jays in suburban habitats. Michelle's independent project compared the behavior of jay fledglings between the suburbs and native scrub, as the young jays began exploring away from the nest. Dr. Bowman recalled, "It was a timely project that showed some really interesting differences in the behavioral development of jays in these two different habitats." While she was a research intern, and before her internship ended, a position became available on the APAFR jay project and Michelle took it, beginning her long career working for Archbold on the jays at APAFR — a career she could barely dream of just a few years earlier.

Over her years shepherding the jays at APAFR, she watched the population grow and fall, but learned how to best manage the habitat for their success. She has led groups from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's volunteer group Ridge Rangers, to implement some of that management at APAFR. She has also been a stalwart advocate for jays and helped create and develop the citizen science program JayWatch, which trains citizen volunteers to monitor jays on public lands across the state. She has attended every annual Florida Scrub-Jay festival, manning booths there and at other festivals and fairs, speaking to other groups, all of which has helped raise the image of scrub-jays as an icon of Florida.

For several years, she was the Chair of the Lakes Wales Ridge Working Group, influencing everyone and all the participating government agencies and non-profits that contribute to the protection of the ridge. She always continued her professional growth, eventually earning her MS degree from Antioch New England Graduate School in 1998.

Michelle has also been an intrinsic member of the Archbold community. Michelle and Lauren Gilson, another Archbold tech working at APAFR, initiated the annual Christmas Silent Auction which Michelle has kept alive for 15 years, raising thousands of dollars for support for children to attend Archbold's Summer Camp. Dozens of children who might not otherwise except for these awards, have experienced the joy of wading in a seasonal pond and learning about the wonders of scrub!

Michelle's last day at APAFR was Oct. 30. After 22 years at Archbold Michelle reminisced, "Archbold was a great place to work. There is so much cumulative knowledge amongst the researchers working there, it really was a privilege to observe and be a part of. It is inspiring how much people are invested in the research they conduct and how visiting researchers come back year after year. Archbold is like an extended family and I will really miss being a part of it."

Michelle did not want a big parting shindig but wanted to go birding with her co-workers and friends at Highlands Hammock State Park — the wish of a true naturalist! Everyone had a socially distanced lunch and cupcakes. We might have had a cake, but Michelle is the best cake maker around and you can't ask someone to bake their own going away cake! Michelle and her husband are heading for drier climes, building a house in New Mexico. She goes armed with a bagful of new field guides, eager to learn the natural history of her new home. We all wish her the best.

A Moody