

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

FLORIDA SCRUB JAY

In early May, near the end of a bike ride along the Lake Beresford-Blue Springs bike path, several fairly large, colorful birds darted in front of me and landed in the tops of nearby shrubs. They were Florida Scrub Jays, a species that is listed as “Threatened” on both the federal and state “Endangered Species Lists”. It’s the only bird that’s endemic to Florida, meaning that it’s found nowhere else in the world. Its closest relatives are found from Texas to California.

Florida Scrub Jays are very attractive birds, about the size of a Blue Jay but without the crest and white wing-spots that distinguish this more

common cousin. A Scrub Jay is mostly blue on the back and light gray with a bluish collar on the underside. In areas where they're acclimated to humans, such as Deltona's Lyonia Preserve, Scrub Jays can become so friendly that they'll land on your arm or head! One of the traits that sets them apart from almost all other birds is "cooperative breeding" : after the young leave the nest and become independent, instead of finding their mates and raising their own young, they assist their parents for one or 2 years in raising additional siblings.

Florida's Scrub Jay numbers have decreased by 90% in recent decades, mostly because their specialized habitat — high, dry, sandy, scrub oak-sand pine areas — has been lost to agriculture or residential development. Even in areas that have been saved for Scrub Jays, unless the woods are prevented from getting too dense and high, these fussy birds can't survive. The best way to manage their habitat is prescribed, controlled burning to keep it open.

Victoria Gardens had a thriving population of Florida Scrub Jays until recently. Even though a wildlife management company is contracted to periodically cut and mow portions of our conservation-area preserves to keep them open for Scrub Jays and gopher tortoises, it seems that the jays — too isolated from any other populations that would have supplied reinforcements to cover their inevitable losses — are gone. This March was the first time in our 8 years of the Annual Bird Count that no Scrub Jays were seen.