



# MAKING FOR THE WAY SCRUB JAY

## ENDANGERED BIRD HAS QUITE A FOLLOWING

### DRIVING SOUTH ON HIGHWAY 565A WITH A CUP OF HOT

coffee, I watch vultures soar in the pale morning sky. Bruce and Cathy Brown have invited me down to the Florida Scrub Jay Trail in Clermont to meet the volunteers dubbed the "Florida Scrub-Jay Trailblazers." I was curious to talk with these volunteers who donate umpteen hours of their time every month to maintain, lead tours and financially contribute to a trail specifically for Florida's only endemic bird species: the Florida Scrub Jay. Who are these people who care so much about this nearly extinct bird?

My curiosity about the Trailblazers is momentarily disrupted as I swerve to miss a lump of vulture breakfast in the middle of the road. Feeling bad for one more creature caught between progress and his hungry stomach, I look out over the pasture from where he must have run. Cows are steaming in the cool morning and a dozen sandhill cranes stalk the bugs overturned by the grazing bovines.







My wheels spit red clay as I turn east onto a dirt road and drive past the picturesque cracker cottage that was built for the 1996 Warner Brothers movie, "Rosewood" (and afterwards purchased by the Browns). In a pen across the way, the Browns' pet donkeys bray hello – or an alert, not sure which as I park my car and climb out into the early morning. I smell more hot coffee.

#### A dedicated group

Once out of the car, I weave through a labyrinth of garden art and pots of lantana, beautyberry, butterfly weed and pentas to arrive at the steps of the cottage. Ten Trailblazers greet me with cheerful "Mornings" as they loiter around the food and coffee table. Guitar music from an instrumental CD plays in the background. Once everyone is gathered, there's a brief update on the previous month's news.

A U.S. Fish and Wildlife grant toward the purchase of 1,200 plants is greeted by cheers, as is a McLean Contributionship grant toward the building of a rehabilitation aviary. Gratitude is expressed for the continuing support of the National Wildlife Habitat Steward program and for 350 scrub oaks given by a private donor. Sadness is shared over the announcement of habitat loss near a recently built water treatment plant. Without apparent irony, the treatment plant's drive was named "Scrub Jay Lane."

Turns out the Sandhill ecosystems that are perfect scrub jay habitat are also perfect for human development: low-growing oak scrub with open sandy patches and scrubby pine flatwoods. And you can find it on the Lake Wales Ridge, a high dry sand dune running right down the backbone of Central Florida that was once the beach front for both the Atlantic Ocean



#### Trailblazers at Work.

This volunteer group meets the fourth Saturday of the month to restore a patch of habitat for the endangered Florida Scrub Jay. There is a family of three Scrub Jays currently living on the land.







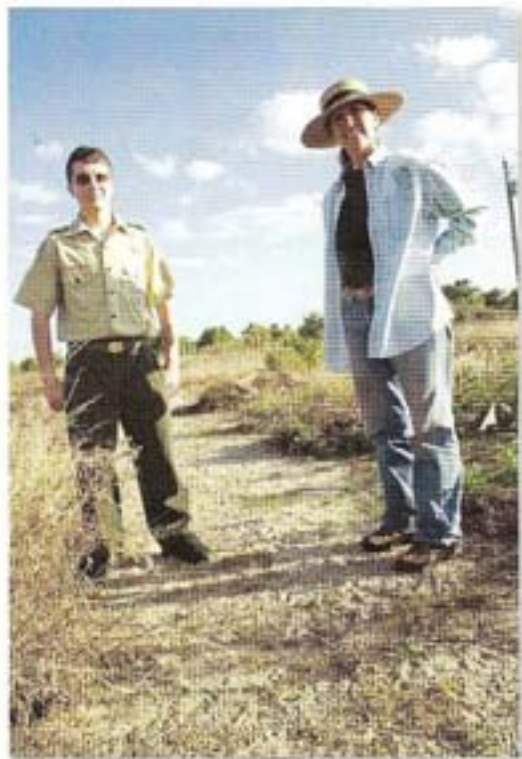
and the Gulf of Mexico. Human intervention is both the hindrance and the hope for restoration and conservation of these fragile ecosystems.

Restoration, however, is not simple. The Trailblazers are removing all nonnative, unnecessary vegetation and introducing native scrub plant material at approximately 200 plants per acre. Each plant must be watered daily for a year, then afterwards only in time of drought. It all seems a bit daunting, but thankfully this morning's list of chores only includes weeding and checking the drip hoses on newly planted sand live oaks.

### **Birth of the trail**

The Scrub Jay Trail began in 1999 when the Browns discovered a breeding pair on their property. The current family of three is only once removed from the original. However, the community of humans in the area has grown immeasurably.

Initially, 60 South Lake and East Ridge High School students, through the Florida Service Learning program, worked weekly clearing the trail, planting native plants and studying the Scrub Jay and plant life of native Florida.



Steven Scott restored a full acre of land for his Eagle Scout project last year with the help of Casby Brown, co-owner of B.B. Brown's Gardens, where the trail starts.









High school building trades students built an information kiosk filled with interpretive graphics created by the art students.

This past spring, Steven Scott, Eagle Scout candidate, restored one full acre with help from Troop #86, family and Trailblazers. The hope is that someday, with the cooperation of landowners, counties, municipalities, developers and homeowners, habitat will eventually be created in corridors and pockets throughout Lake County with this original 12-acre project as trailhead.

### **The Trailblazers**

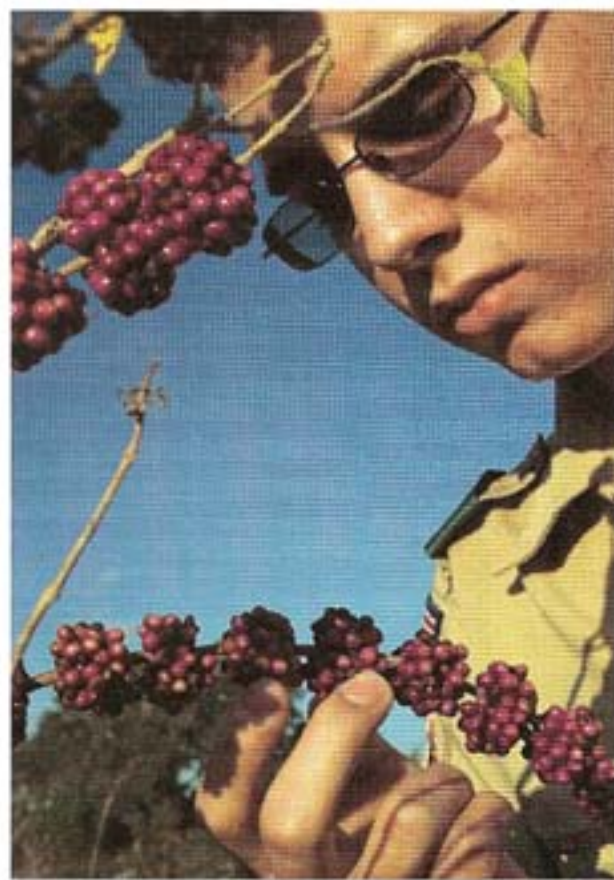
Bruce Brown pulls up to the start of the trail on a noisy lawn tractor to check for leaks in the drip irrigation system. Three Trailblazers – Bill and Joyce and her 87-year-old mother, Tess – walk behind. Why are they out early on a Saturday morning?

Joyce quickly tells of their enchantment with a tiny, friendly bird found only in Florida, and a strong desire to leave a lasting environmental legacy. She even teases about Bill's tendency to insist that visiting friends travel with them around Central Florida to try and spot the Scrub Jay.

It is getting warmer on the sandy trail as the sun rises past the chapman, myrtle, inopina and sand live oaks. Cars rush past on the highway and a small plane flies overhead. Bruce drives by again with water bottles and more rakes. He stops at a large pile of brush, takes it up and moves on. The two people responsible for this large pile of discarded invasive plants are in their 20s. What brings them out when, I assume, most of their peers are still asleep?

Coral and John are on a mission to bring a Christian passion to conservation. They are direct about their love for God and want to serve by tending the earth's creatures.

John has been volunteering for about six months and was drawn because of his love for all birds in the Corvidae family, or corvids, as they are more commonly known. The Florida Scrub Jay is in the same Latin family grouping as crows, ravens, blue jays and nutcrackers, among others. Their



Steven inspects some of the shrubs planted during restoration of the trail area.

intelligence is superior because they live and work in cooperative broods – not unlike this morning's Trailblazers, notes John.

It's late and I have to leave to take care of my own young ones. As I walk to my car past the "Caution Gopher Tortoise" signs and the newly planted scrub, I look for the Scrub jay where he usually perches, guarding his family of birds and humans. I'm not lucky enough to see him this morning, but I do catch the eye of Cathy Brown. Her smile can be seen from below her hat and above the brush and her bright eyes say, "You are always welcome here!"

Currently the Florida Scrub Jay Trail in Clermont is open to the public on Saturday and Sunday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and by appointment for groups. Call (352) 429-5566 for information. ■