

Laurence Reisman: Indian River scrub jays benefit from foresight, new app

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Ever had a close encounter with a scrub jay? It's easy to remember my first in the late 1980s: After finishing a hole at Sebastian Municipal Golf Course, I watched as one tried to fly away from my cart with a peanut-butter cracker.

Scrub jay families haven't frequented the course since after the 2004 hurricanes, said Beth Powell, conservation lands manager for Indian River County. But the number of scrub jays, deemed threatened in 1987 under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, has been growing steadily in land preserved and managed by the county.

Powell's charged with managing a habitat conservation plan to ensure scrub jays thrive. The plan was in response to development issues, largely in Sebastian, in the early 1990s.

Back then, county officials wanted to buy and preserve 111 acres off County Road 510 next to the golf course at John's Island West. Bob Keating, then the county's community development director, and Roland DeBlois, its chief environmental planner, took me on a tour of a virtual desert — hot white sand, short oak trees, some pines and lots of brush, including cactus.

I was enamored by the scrub habitat and its jays — friendly blue-jay wannabes. Such habitat makes the numerous golf courses along Indian River County's Atlantic Coastal Ridge fun to play. Still, I wasn't impressed by the junked washing machines on the Wabasso scrub property. To me, it wasn't worth buying; I figured no one would ever build on it.

But the county shortly thereafter bought and created the Wabasso Scrub Conservation Area, accessible via West Wabasso Park on 64th Avenue.

Also in the early 1990s, conservationist Carolyn Corum showed me a small portion of 407 acres behind Sebastian City Hall. It had water, scrub and more. It was prime acreage for developers, who would have destroyed it and the scrub jays I saw that day. Its acquisition by the county in 1996, in part thanks to matching state funding, was a no-brainer.

Over the years, the county acquired more land and by 1999 adopted the conservation plan for the property. Adoption came after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service threatened to stop development on 317 lots inhabited by the protected scrub jay throughout the Sebastian Highlands. The Fish and Wildlife Service also agreed not to contest development on 14,000 other lots.

Nowadays, 10 volunteers help Powell track scrub jay families on county land (http://www.ircgov.com/Departments/General_Services/Parks/Conservation/Index.htm). They've attended 16 hours of training sessions and soon will have a new tool to report their findings — a Smartphone application designed by Paige Lester, a county global information systems technician.

“You can't see a scrub jay and not fall immediately in love with them,” said Powell, whose scrub jay work is only a small part of her job. She's proud of the fact that so much has been done locally to preserve scrub habitat, including at St. Sebastian River Preserve State Park, Pelican Island Elementary School and even 10.6 acres resident Jane Schnee bought in Sebastian for the jays.

The result: Since 2009, in county land monitored by Powell and her volunteers, the number of scrub jays has increased from 56 to 92, while families have increased from 13 to 27. The birds are tagged and volunteers have documented some birds moving from one conservation area to another. The North County Conservation Area behind Sebastian City Hall is home to the most families.

“They're just the most amazing birds to me because they have such an intricate family system,” Powell said. “Everybody has a role to play. They're like the Brady Bunch.”

And any of us can watch them interact, up close or with binoculars — so long as we do not feed them; that's harmful to their health and future ability ward off predators.

Powell spoke of how you can see mom and dad foraging for food, while older siblings help raise the younger children before going out to play and roam the neighborhood. You can see the babies begging for attention and later learning to live independently.

“We can relate to that because it's so similar to our own family structures,” she said.

And it's all in your backyard. Thanks to people, including Indian River County taxpayers, who had the vision to preserve land and fund it through bond referendums and state matching funds two decades ago.

This column reflects the opinion of Laurence Reisman. Email him at larry.reisman@tcpalm.com, call 772-978-2223 or Twitter @LaurenceReisman.

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