

# Protection of habitat key to bird's survival

GAINESVILLE (AP) — The dwindling Florida scrub jay population stands a good chance of bouncing back since it was declared a threatened species, which makes it illegal to disturb the bird or its eggs, a University of Florida zoology professor says.

"It's a major step forward. I don't see the loss of the scrub jay in the near future," said J.W. Hardy, curator of birds at the Florida State Museum at the University of Florida.

The scrub jay, which resembles the blue jay, but without a crest or bold markings, was listed as a threatened species July 1 under the federal Endangered Species Act.

There were an estimated 15,500 to 22,500 scrub jays in 1984, the latest year figures are available. That is about half of the population 100 years ago, said Jeffrey Cox, who recently published a book on the scrub jay.

Hardy said anywhere from 11,900 to 18,900 birds could survive indefinitely with well-managed, publicly owned sites designed to preserve the bird's natural habitat.

The scrub jay's habitat is the Florida scrub, which consists of sand-pine trees, various types

of shrubs and several kinds of small oaks, all of which grow in white sand.

The scrub must be burned every five to seven years to keep it from becoming too dense or tall and scaring off the scrub jays.

"The bird is absolutely limited to that kind of habitat," Hardy said.

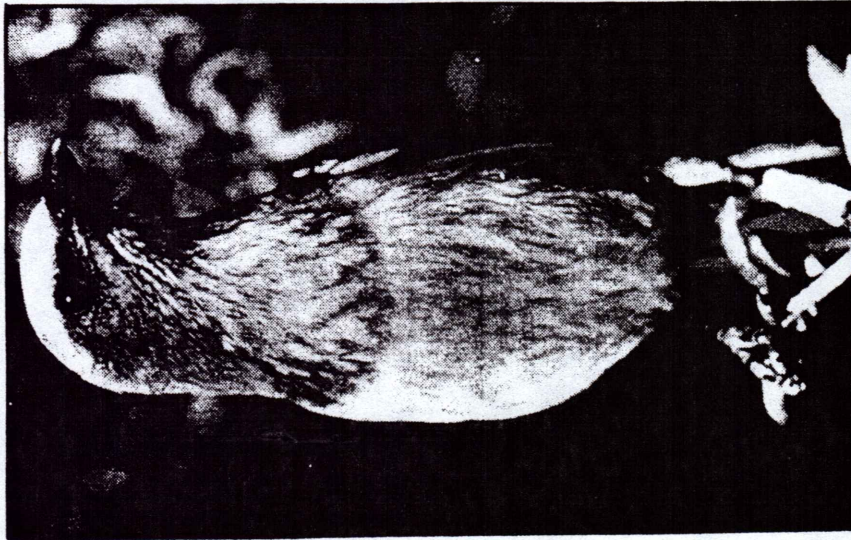
The areas where the scrub and the jay primarily exist are on Merritt Island and in the Ocala National Forest.

But while the scrub jay can't survive without its natural environment, people generally do not find the scrub appealing, Hardy said.

"The scrubby habitat is very easy to cut down and is not awe-inspiring in appearance," Hardy said. "That makes it harder to convince people that it's worth saving."

Much of what used to be scrub in Florida has been replaced by housing or citrus groves, he said.

"The state needs to try to educate the public, especially landowners, as to how the habitat could be preserved," Hardy said, adding that the key to the scrub jay's survival is state-owned sites preserved by controlled burnings.



Associated Press photograph  
The Florida scrub jay was listed as a threatened species July 1.

## Planning Council backs developer

BROOKSVILLE — The developer of the planned Seven Hills subdivision should not have to preserve 50 acres of habitat for the state-protected gopher tortoise or pay the state \$125,000 to buy land elsewhere, the Withlacoochee Regional Planning Council decided Thursday night.

Planning Council members said the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission was asking too much of the developer, Pasco County eye surgeon Dr. James Gills, who plans to build 2,700 units on a 938-acre tract of dry scrub land in southwest Hernando County.

The regional council also approved the Seven Hills development as part of its Development of Regional Impact review. The council's recommendations now are passed to the Hernando County Board of County Commissioners, which is scheduled to take final action on Seven Hills Aug. 25.

Planning council members were not influenced by state biological scientist Perry Oldenburg's assessment that an estimated 400 to 600 gopher tortoises at Seven Hills were a "regionally significant" resource.