The Conservation Endowment Fund and the Florida Scrub Jay

Over the last 100 years, the now threatened Florida scrub-jay (Aphelocoma coerulescens) has lost 85 percent of its population. This endemic bird lives only in the unique oak scrub habitat of peninsular Florida. But, due to the popularity of developing scrub habitat in Florida for residential development as well as habitat loss and degradation from fire suppression, we continue to see a rapid decline in the Florida scrub-jay population.

Florida scrub-jays are often viewed as an umbrella species for scrub habitats. They eat a variety of animals and plants and are known to harvest 6,000 to 8,000 acorns for use throughout the year. Having healthy populations benefit a variety of species including the Florida mouse, gopher tortoise, gopher frog, scrub lizard and indigo snake. In addition, this is one of the few cooperative breeding birds in North America. Fledgling Florida scrub-jays remain in their parent’s habitat for several years and help to rear young, watch for predators, and defend territory against neighboring Florida scrub-jay family groups.

In 2008, in collaboration with several public and private partners, Brevard Zoo completed the first successful translocation of a family unit of Florida scrub-jays in Brevard County, Fla. All agencies involved believe that translocation of Florida scrub-jays from poor quality habitats to managed public conservation lands enhances the overall long-term survival of jays. Further, the methodology includes the translocation of entire family units, consisting of breeding male and female and any helpers. The experimental aspect of moving an entire family unit is thought to provide more stability and structure thus reducing the rate of dispersal.

The translocation effort’s initial success galvanized the decision to attempt the translocation of six family units to managed conservation land in northern Brevard County in December 2009. Thanks to funding provided by the AZA Conservation Endowment Fund (CEF) and the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund (DWCF) a larger scale effort was made possible. The funds were used to build additional soft release enclosures, provide food for training in Potter traps and for monitoring in the field post release.

Over the span of a week these six family units, totaling 15 jays, were color banded and relocated to strategically placed hack – or soft release – enclosures and set loose into Buck Lake Conservation Area (BLCA) in Mims, Fla., a 700-acre parcel of land. Daily intensive monitoring of the jays continued during the first two weeks post-release and slowly reduced in the following months. Zoo staff and trained citizen scientists continue to provide field reports. Special attention was paid to activities during breeding season, which is March through May, to determine territorial boundaries. Because of the unique social nature of the species, we are allowed the opportunity to monitor without the use of radio transmitters. To date 13 out of the 15 translocated jays continue to be monitored.

Additional translocations and careful management may be necessary to produce a self-sustaining population. With high survival, low dispersal and reproduction indicating success, the data collected during the translocation efforts will help identify translocation as an effective management tool for creating sustainable Florida scrub-jay populations.