



Prescribed Fire Maintains Critical Scrub-Jay Habitat



Threatened Florida scrub-jay, by Dr. Thomas Barnes.

The Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge has one of the largest contiguous populations of the federally threatened Florida scrub-jay. Regular prescribed burning is essential for maintaining scrub-jay habitat in suitable condition for the long term survival of this species.

How Fire Helps

- Frequent, regular prescribed burns are necessary to preserve appropriate scrub height and structure.
- Burns maintain grass-dominated wetlands between scrub ridges, enhancing landscape connectivity.
- Frequent prescribed fire provides a mosaic of scrub at different ages, as well as openings in scrub, needed for successful scrub-jay reproduction.

Without Fire

- Without repeated fire at short intervals, scrub habitat becomes too tall and dense, resulting in increased nest predation and low scrub-jay reproduction rates.
- Infrequent fire causes a build-up of continuous hazardous fuels. This increases the risk of long and intense uncontrolled wildfires, which can have catastrophic effects on scrub-jay populations.
- Without frequent fire, wetlands between scrub ridges, which are normally dominated by grasses, become overgrown with hardwood species, restricting scrub-jay habitat use.
- Once hardwoods and pines are established, expensive mechanical removal often becomes necessary to restore habitat.

Current Situation

- Currently there is a need to maintain and increase regular prescribed burns on the refuge to retain and enhance critical scrub-jay habitat.
- Current federal funding for prescribed fire provides minimal support for maintaining and restoring watersheds, wildlife habitats, natural ecosystems, or recovery of threatened and endangered species.
- Prescribed fires will not only benefit Florida scrub-jays, but will also prevent the buildup of hazardous fuels in areas adjacent to critical space flight infrastructure at the Kennedy Space Center, which shares property in common with the refuge.