

2021

# THE VG VOICE

YOUR WEEKLY E-NEWSLETTER

## Wildlife of Victoria Park by John Serrao



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St. Francis Trail

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### Explore a Preserve Nature Trail Today

Get some fresh air by walking one of the nature trails within the community.

There are two nature trails you can explore, the North and South Trail. Click the Preserve Photo to the right to find the entrance



### Nature Trail Maintenance

The semi-annual mowing of the North and South preserve was recently done



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

## AUTUMN COLORS IN FLORIDA? BY JOHN SERRAO

**One** of the seasonal highlights of living in the more northern and mountainous parts of our country is the autumn foliage. Many of the deciduous trees — maples, birches, beech, tuliptree, sassafras, even some oaks — undergo a miraculous transformation from the green, chlorophyll-dominated color of summer to the red-yellow-orange-purple hues caused by carotene and anthocyanin pigments. Here in Florida, where most of our trees are evergreen or semi-evergreen, we don't witness such a profound color display. Our pines, palms, and oaks, for the most part, stay green all year long.

Nevertheless, there are some trees in our southeastern states that undergo seasonal changes and give us a little taste of northern autumn. Instead of happening in September or October, their leaves don't turn color until late November or December. One of these trees — red or swamp maple — happens to be our country's most widely distributed tree. It grows from Canada all the way into southern Florida and westward through the midwestern states. Along with its close relative, sugar maple, red maple is responsible for much of the outstanding, vibrant colors taken on by the forests of New England, the mid-Atlantic, and Great Lakes states in October. Look for this tree's beautiful leaves now in our wetlands and along our rivers.

A second wetland tree that becomes absolutely awesome in late autumn and early winter in Florida is sweet gum. This is the tree with star-shaped, 5-pointed leaves and round, spiked seed balls. Sweetgum doesn't grow as far north as red maple, reaching only up into New Jersey and Connecticut. Its leaves turn from green to red, pink, yellow, and deep purple along our rivers, creeks, canals, and swamps.

There's a smaller tree that turns a brilliant scarlet in autumn — shining or winged sumac. This tree grows in sunny clearings, roadsides, old fields, and other disturbed areas. Its compound, fern-like leaves have mostly fallen off by now but there are still some clinging to the branches. They don't cause a rash like those of its relative, poison sumac.

Finally, there's even an oak in Florida that shows some pretty colors before its leaves fall off, unlike most of Florida's other oaks that hold onto their leaves in winter. Named turkey oak after the resemblance of some of its large leaves to the 3-toed feet of a turkey, this tree grows in dry, sandy, scrubby areas. Its autumn leaves turn dark, rusty red, and brownish-gold — not as colorful as those of maple or sweet gum, but still a nice addition to Florida's more sedate autumn forests.

06 January



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

## PAINTED BUNTING BY JOHN SERRAO

20 January

*If any of you maintain bird feeders during the Florida winters, be on the lookout for a visitor that has often been described as “North America’s most beautiful bird”. In fact, the French explorers called it “nonpareil”, or ‘without equal”. The Painted Bunting has to be seen to be believed. The adult male has all the colors of the rainbow: dark blue head, red rump and belly, yellow and greenback, and dark green wings with purplish highlights. The female lacks this kaleidoscope of colors, but her completely lime-green body is also eye-catching.*

*Related to the cardinal and other finches, the Painted Bunting breeds in 2 separate geographic regions of the country. The western range is mostly in Texas, extending into Mississippi and Kansas. The eastern range is along the coast, from southern North Carolina to Florida’s Brevard County, as well as along a few of our state’s large rivers like St. Johns. In winter, most Painted Buntings migrate south from their breeding areas into subtropical and tropical areas (where, unfortunately, many are illegally trapped for the pet trade), but some stop to spend the cooler months here in Florida. In fact, Florida is the only state that supports both a breeding and a winter population of this gorgeous bird. In early January, a male Painted Bunting somehow wound up in a Maryland park, and hundreds of people showed up to catch a glimpse.*

*Look for the Painted Bunting in its preferred habitats of brushy fields, coastal scrub, and the shrubby edges of woods where it searches for seeds. I’ve seen them in winter at Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge (DeLeon Springs), Merritt Island NWR, and Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive, where I was lucky enough to capture the attached photos of a male eating grass seeds. And they also visit bird feeders, as reported by Lynn Campbell of Victoria Gardens. Let me know if you see one at your feeder.*



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

03 February

## MUSCOVY DUCKS BY JOHN SERRAO

*There's a "wildlife" problem developing in Victoria Park, and it's only going to get more serious unless we do something about it now. A population of Muscovy Ducks has somehow become established in several ponds in Victoria Trails and Hills, and in 2 short years they've increased from 2 to 14. These invasive ducks are native to South and Central America, Mexico, and parts of Texas, but years ago they were illegally released in Florida as pets or for "ornamental" purposes around private ponds. They're also raised for food; in fact, they were domesticated and bred for that purpose by indigenous people in the Americas from ancient times. Today, these ducks thrive in urban and suburban areas throughout Florida as "wild" self-breeding populations.*

*The Muscovy Duck is easy to recognize, not only because of its large size (up to 15 pounds for a male) but for the irregular, bumpy, fleshy, red skin on the face. The colors of the feathers are variable, ranging from mostly white to mostly black to bicolored, usually with some glossy, iridescent, greenish sheen. They hiss rather than quack, and become quite tame around people, especially if they're being fed, which is always a bad idea.*

*Why are Muscovy Ducks a problem? Their abundant droppings befoul lawns, backyards, water shorelines, ponds, and lakes, and have been known to spread E. coli and salmonella. The ducks also rip out native aquatic plants and grasses, including expensive ones that were planted recently around 2 ponds in Victoria Trails. This may also lead to the erosion and collapse of pond banks. They are aggressive toward our native waterfowl and are such prolific breeders (up to 15 eggs per nest) that they often outnumber and replace them in suburban situations. Because of these negative traits, it is illegal to release these invasive ducks anywhere in Florida. If you'd like to see what might develop once their numbers increase further, check out the polluted, sterile pond in downtown DeLand.*

*The Florida Wildlife Commission doesn't remove Muscovy Ducks, but private landowners are allowed to do so without a permit, or hire professional nuisance wildlife trappers, several of which operate in our area.*



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

17 February

## RATS BY JOHN SERRAO

**"Rats"! The very word elicits feelings of disgust, revulsion, and even fear. Rats have been responsible for spreading some of history's most dreaded diseases such as bubonic plague and typhoid. And they cause enormous economic losses to agricultural crops and damages to homes from their infestations. But, on the positive side, rats are also major subjects of scientific research and, thus, indirectly responsible for many important human medical advances – the white lab rat is actually a domesticated variety of the feared Norway Rat. There are 2 native kinds of rats in central Florida and 2 aliens. The alien species came into our country on ships from Europe hundreds of years ago, but they're actually originally native to Asia. The Black Rat, or Roof Rat, arrived on our shores in the early 1600s. Also known as the Palm Rat and Citrus Rat in Florida, this rodent is about 17 inches long including its long, scaly, 9-inch tail. Its fur is black or dark brown and smooth. As one of its names implies, this rat often invades attics.**

**The Norway Rat, or Brown Rat, is a bit larger than the Black Rat but has a shorter tail. It's also lighter in color – brown or gray – and usually lives in outdoor burrows, basements, and crawlspaces rather than roofs and attics. It arrived in America more than 150 years after the Black Rat and, due to its larger size and more aggressive nature, it has displaced its earlier relative in many places, especially farms, garbage dumps, and sewers.**

**There are 2 native species of rats that you might encounter in Victoria Park (see my 2 attached photos). The Eastern Woodrat is about the size of a Norway Rat and is similar in color on top. The belly and feet, however, are white, the ears and eyes are larger, the tail is slightly furry rather than naked and scaly, and the fur is soft, making for a very attractive rodent. In woodlands, Woodrats often construct large nests out of sticks, either in a tree or under a log, and they sometimes "steal" human objects to add to these dens. They're called "Pack Rats" in the western U.S.**

**The other native rat, often seen in Victoria Park eating grass along the edges of our conservation areas, is the Hispid Cotton Rat. This dark brown rodent has lots of grizzled gray interspersed into its coarse fur and has a short tail and small ears. It consumes mostly green plants and travels in grassy areas along runways.**



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

## CUBAN TREE FROG BY JOHN SERRAO

03 March

Warmer, wetter weather soon will signal the start of another breeding season for Florida's frogs. One of the largest, and most unwelcome, is the Cuban Treefrog, an alien, invasive species that first appeared in the Keys in the 1920s and by the 1970s spread throughout most of peninsular Florida. In Victoria Park and other residential areas, this frog hides by day in rain gutters, behind outdoor window shutters, beneath eaves, and other dark, moist places. At night it emerges to search for prey – mostly insects but also any smaller frogs. Since a large female Cuban Treefrog can reach 5 inches, none of Florida's native treefrogs, which are considerably smaller, stand a chance against this predator. Scientific studies have shown that they have caused marked declines in the populations of our native frogs, and I have witnessed this myself during my 10 years in Victoria Gardens. Where I once found dozens of beautiful Green Treefrogs, Barking Treefrogs, and the small green Squirrel Treefrogs hiding behind the shutters at the Clubhouse, now there are mostly Cuban Treefrogs.

Although its coloration is quite varied – from tan to gray to mottled green to almost white (especially when it's hiding on light exterior walls) – the Cuban Treefrog is easy to identify by its immense toe pads. These enable it to excel at climbing trees and vertical walls of buildings. The breeding call of the male (every species of frog has its own distinctive call to attract females) sounds like a rubbery snore, or the sound made by rubbing wet fingers across a balloon.

The skin of a Cuban Treefrog secretes a toxic substance when the frog is captured, and this can be very irritating and burning in contact with the eyes, nose, mouth, or an open cut on the skin. Many mammals will avoid this frog, but I've seen several species of snakes eating them in the wild, including Black Racer, Yellow Rat Snake, and Garter Snake. As more kinds of predators adapt to eating this abundant resource, perhaps some semblance of balance can be reached, but it appears that the effects on our native treefrog numbers will continue to be negative as the Cuban Treefrog continues to expand its range





# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

17 March

By John Serrao

## SCRUB JAY

There was once a time when you could drive along Victoria Gardens Road and see several Florida Scrub Jays perched on the pines at the edge of the conservation area. Several families of these beautiful, “friendly” birds lived in the sandy, scrubby woods of Victoria Park. In fact, their presence was one of the reasons why more than 25% of the land proposed for development into Victoria Park in 1999 was mandated to be set aside perpetually and scientifically managed to prevent their decline. They’re all gone now — the last ones were seen about 3 years ago.



The Florida Scrub Jay is our state’s only endemic bird, meaning that it’s found nowhere else in the world. The ancient sandy ridge that runs down the center of the state, the old coastal sand dunes, and a few other dry, sandy expanses of oak and pine are the only places on earth where this bird survives. It requires open, low-growing (3 to 6 feet high) scrub habitat with sandy soils and open, bare, treeless patches — the highest, driest areas in Florida — as its habitat. Here, among the stunted myrtle oaks, sand live oaks, sand pines, Florida rosemary, and prickly pear cactus, the scrub jays raise their families on a diet of mostly acorns, insects, and seeds. Thousands of acorns are “cached” each autumn — buried in the bare sand for later retrieval.

About the size of a Blue Jay, it lacks that bird’s crest and black markings. The head, nape, wings, bib, and long tail are blue, the forehead is whitish, and the back and underparts are gray. The Florida Scrub Jay is one of the few birds in the world that practices “cooperative breeding”.

Instead of leaving their parents when they fledge, the young jays remain with them for up to 3 years and help them raise more families of siblings. It’s not uncommon to see 6 to 8 Florida Scrub Jays traveling together through the scrub.

It’s estimated that only 7,700 to 9,300 Florida Scrub Jays remain in the world — a 90% reduction from their original numbers. The species is classified as “threatened” on both federal and state Endangered Species Lists, and its numbers continue to decline. The reasons are very clear and twofold. First of all, most of their habitat has been taken and converted to housing, citrus groves, and other agriculture. Secondly, their required scrub habitat is naturally replaced by taller, thicker oak-pine forests unless it is periodically burned, as it had been by frequent wildfires through the ages before humans settled here and suppressed fires. Once this happens, and the area’s open, patchy nature disappears, the birds leave or fail to reproduce. And, if there’s no “connectivity” with other nearby preferred habitat, the populations of Florida Scrub Jays blink out.



That’s what happened in Victoria Park. Periodic mowing and brushcutting in our conservation areas by our contracted private biological company has been a poor substitute for the prescribed burning that’s been proven successful in maintaining the open, sandy nature in larger scrub jay habitats such as Ocala National Forest and several state parks. Scrub Jays are non-migratory and very sedentary, and rarely wander from their patch of scrub. As their habitats continue to become fragmented and overgrown, it’s impossible for them to travel to a new home — such places either don’t exist anymore or they’re too far away. (To see this rare, beautiful bird, visit the Lyonia Preserve in Deltona)



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

31 March

By John Serrao

## RESULTS OF THE 10TH ANNUAL VICTORIA PARK BIRD COUN

On March 21 — the last day of “winter” — the 10th Annual Victoria Park Bird Count was conducted on a beautiful, sunny, clear day. Eight of us spent the morning searching for birds in the 4 sections of Victoria Park, as we have every March since 2012. Our goal — to identify as many species as possible — was accomplished in a victorious fashion as we found 67 different species — a new record! 49 of those species were seen by the group in the morning by stopping at “hotspots” such as the Victoria Gardens conservation areas and cow pasture, and the many ponds and lakes in the Commons, Hills, and Trails. I managed to find an additional 16 species in the afternoon by searching alone in the undeveloped areas and woods throughout Victoria Park. American Goldfinches were reported by Lynn Campbell at her feeders in the Gardens, and a Chuck-wills-widow by Ann McMillan was species #67.

Highlights of the morning included both Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks, Bald Eagle, several Swallow-tailed Kites, 3 Wood Storks, American Kestrel, Eastern Bluebird, close looks at 4 species of woodpeckers (Pileated, Red-bellied, Red-headed, and Downy — the first 3 all in Victoria Hills), flocks of migrating Cedar Waxwings, 6 species of warblers (Yellow-rumped, Palm, Pine, Parula, Prairie, and Common Yellowthroat), and — best of all — a baby Great Horned Owl peeking out of its nest in Victoria Gardens!

In the afternoon I upped the warbler total to 8 with a Black and White Warbler and a Yellow-throated Warbler in the Gardens, and, in Victoria Hills, I saw a Cooper’s Hawk harassing flocks of Fish Crows, Common Grackles, and Boat-tailed Grackles; a migrating Sharp-shinned Hawk; and a surprisingly late pair of overwintering Hooded Mergansers in a pond. In Victoria Trails, I found a pair of Mottled Ducks on a pond, and the first Purple Martins of the year circling and vocalizing high in the sky. Back in the Victoria Gardens conservation areas, I added Great Blue Heron (on a remote pond where an alligator was roaring!), House Wren, White-eyed Vireo, and — another big surprise — a covey of Bobwhite Quail! There was also a partially albino Wild Turkey walking along the shore of a pond and, finally, upon returning home at 6:45 PM, I was greeted by an Osprey and Ruby-throated Hummingbird in my own backyard.

(The complete list of 67 species can be seen on the Victoria Park website - “Conservation & Wildlife”)





# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

12 May

By John Serrao

## EASTERN SCREECH OWL



Almost every dead palm tree lining Bio Lab Road in Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge had one or more holes drilled by woodpeckers. And the red-bellied woodpeckers were plentiful that day in mid-April when I visited this amazing bird refuge in Titusville. Then something different caught my eye at the entrance to one of the tree cavities — feathers blowing in the breeze. My binoculars revealed its identity — an Eastern Screech Owl, my first in the wild in Florida! Ten years ago, I saw one peeking out of a manmade nesting box (coincidentally, also at the Merritt Island NWR Visitor Center), and 5 years ago I found a road-killed Screech Owl in Victoria Gardens. But this was my first bonafide one in the wild in Florida and I took plenty of pictures as the owl turned its head and stared in my direction with its big, bright yellow eyes.

The Eastern Screech Owl is the smallest of Florida's 7 species of owls. Its stocky body stands just 8 to 10 inches high, and it has a wingspan of fewer than 2 feet. Its most prominent feature, besides its small stature, is the pair of "ear" tufts — feathers that stand on its head, reminiscent of those of its much larger relative, the Great Horned Owl. The Screech Owl's mottled, barred patterns to its feathers give it superlative camouflage. By freezing perfectly still, with its ear tufts raised and eyes closed, it becomes part of the tree bark, or a small, broken, upright limb itself.



In Florida, Screech Owls come in 3 different colors — reddish-brown, gray, and brown. Although this bird is found in residential areas, parks, farms, and ranches, as well as woodlands and wetlands, it is hardly ever seen, both because of its camouflage and its strictly nocturnal nature. It is, however, often heard at night: sometimes a descending, whinnying, horse-like call or wail, and sometimes a tremulous, long, low trill on one pitch. Both of these calls sound spooky and human-like and add to the Screech Owl's mysterious nature.



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

26 May

By John Serrao

## EASTERN COACHWHIP SNAKE

It's been 8 months since I've written about snakes in this biweekly column, so it's about time to cover one of the 20 species that have been recorded in Victoria Park. I've been seeing quite a few Coachwhip Snakes in the past month — one in Victoria Gardens, then 4 in the Florida Panhandle, and then one in mid-May near the Victoria Hills golf course. To see one of these big, alert snakes is a memorable experience, but also a brief one. The Coachwhip is our country's fastest snake, and, usually, no sooner is it discovered than it dashes away into a thicket, tortoise burrow, or up into the branches of a shrub or tree.



The record length for an Eastern Coachwhip is 8 1/2 feet — only 1/2 inch shorter than the record size for our country's largest snake, the Indigo Snake. I found one beneath a sheet of plywood in Victoria Gardens that measured exactly 7 feet (see accompanying photo) and saw another one here that approached or exceeded 8 feet. Unlike the Indigo, however, the Coachwhip is very slender, and a good portion of its length is composed of a long, thin tail that resembles a braided whip. The coloration varies from solid, sandy tan (generally with the top of the head darker) to solid dark brown to partly rusty-red to, most commonly, tan but turning very dark, almost black on the neck and head. The eyes of a Coachwhip are huge, and it is often seen with its head and anterior body raised up in a periscope position as it uses its keen vision to look for the slightest movement.



The motion of a frog, mouse, bird, snake, large insect, or, especially, lizard will cause the Coachwhip to dash toward its potential prey, but an approaching human invariably results in a lightning-fast escape for cover. However, if a Coachwhip is cornered, it becomes one of our most fearless snakes. The tail vibrates on the ground, the body coils and rears up into an "S" shape, and it strikes repeatedly at its enemy's face. If captured, it bites repeatedly and draws blood, but it's not venomous. Strangely enough, a captured Coachwhip may also "surrender" and feign death, with its body limp, mouth open, and tongue hanging out!

Coachwhips specialize in open, dry, sandy habitats such as scrub, sandhill, pine-palmetto, prairie, and coastal dune. Victoria Park has some prime habitat in its conservation areas and along the power-line-right-of-way bordering the golf course.

# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

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By John Serrao

## BROWN THRASHER

Many of you may have seen a colorful, fairly large songbird (larger than a robin but smaller than a crow) in our neighborhoods. It is a beautiful, rusty/reddish-brown bird with a long tail, lots of dark streaks on its light belly, and a long, slightly curved bill. If you did see it, it was probably just a quick glimpse as it scooted for cover —by flying or running like a long-tailed mouse — into the dense cover of low shrubs. Or maybe you heard this bird singing its loud notes from the top of a tree. Its an exuberant song, described by many naturalists as even more beautiful than that of a mockingbird, one of its close relatives. The phrases of the song, however, are given in pairs, unlike the mockingbird which usually repeats each of its many phrases 3 or more times.

This bird is the Brown Thrasher, a permanent resident of Florida and a fairly common, but very secretive, inhabitant of many suburban neighborhoods, as well as the thickets, undergrowth, and edges of our woodlands. It spends most of its time close to the ground where it flips over dead leaves in search of beetles, grubs, spiders, and earthworms. It also ascends into low branches of trees and shrubs to seek berries, acorns, and nuts. The Brown Thrasher is also large and bold enough to grab lizards and frogs.

Thrashers build their bulky stick-twig nests 2 to 7 feet above the ground in very dense shrubbery or vine tangles where they are very difficult to see. In fact, they often raise their young in the ornamental shrubs of our yards without us ever knowing they've been there. However, if a nest is discovered or disturbed by a person (or pet), the Brown Thrasher will defend it aggressively and noisily, and has even been known to physically attack and strike the intruder. Look for the foxy-red Brown Thrasher in Victoria Park now as it raises perhaps its second brood of nestlings in our shrubs. And listen for a male singing its loud territorial song from the top of a tree.



# WILDLIFE IN VICTORIA PARK

By John Serrao

## EASTERN TIGER SWALLOWTAIL



Florida is blessed with about 175 species of butterflies, including our country's smallest — the Eastern Pygmy Blue, with a wingspread of just a bit over 1/2 inch — and the two largest. Both of these giants are swallowtails, with wingspreads that may exceed 5 inches. One of them is even named the Giant Swallowtail, and is sometimes seen sipping nectar from flowers or depositing eggs on citrus trees. The other is more common in Victoria Park, and in fact, is one of our country's most widespread and familiar butterflies — the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail. This bright yellow butterfly with bold black stripes is one of the most impressive visitors to our yards and gardens. The species grows larger in the south, and Florida female Tiger Swallowtails are considered the largest butterflies in the United States.

The Eastern Tiger Swallowtail was the subject of the first known drawing of any North American butterfly, a sketch by John White in 1587 while on an expedition with Sir Walter Raleigh in Roanoke. Its adaptability has enabled it to thrive throughout its range, from southern New England to Florida and westward to Texas and the Great Plains. One of the main reasons for its success is the wide range of host plants eaten by its caterpillar. Instead of relying exclusively on one species or group of plants, like the Monarch Butterfly on milkweeds, the caterpillar of the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail can feed on the leaves of many different, even unrelated plants — tuliptree, ash, wild cherry, sweet bay, wafer ash and others. (The closely related Canadian Tiger Swallowtail, a smaller butterfly of the north that was only recognized as a separate species in the 1990s, has a caterpillar that feeds on aspen, which would kill the caterpillars of the Eastern Tiger, and, conversely, it finds the leaves of tuliptree toxic.)

It's easy to differentiate between the male and female of this butterfly. Females have an abundance of blue color on the bottom of their hind wings, just above the "tails", while males have just a little. Interestingly, some female Tiger Swallowtails come in a dark, or melanistic form (the black stripes are still barely visible, like the spots on a black leopard). This dark form is present only where it coincides with the range of the Pipevine Swallowtail, a highly toxic species that the dark Tiger Swallowtails mimic to protect them from predators that have learned to avoid them. Dark Tiger Swallowtails are rare in our region but become more common in the Appalachians where the Pipevine Swallowtail is also common.

One of the most amazing encounters I ever had with Eastern Tiger Swallowtails was this past April in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. A group of several dozen of these spectacular butterflies was concentrated around a moist, muddy patch of earth beside a stream. These were all males, sipping up minerals like

sodium from the ground in a behavior known as "puddling" that is practiced by swallowtails, sulphurs, blues, and some skippers.

If you want to enjoy this beauty and others on your property, plant native flowering plants as well as the host plants of their caterpillars. Above all, avoid using pesticides, which kill all caterpillars