

## The Last Rosemary Scrub of Audley Way

*By Chelsea LeNoble*

(The name of the property has been changed to “Audley Way” to protect the privacy of current residents. Some scenes, rather than exact depictions, are mosaics assembled of moments I experienced during my time there from November, 2021 to May, 2022.)

It was morning when I first encountered the last rosemary scrub of Audley Way. I wandered, dewy-faced, from the edge of the dirt road through the curtains of her bright, chewy heat. My black Brooks sneakers gulped her white, sugar sand and slogged cautiously to her interior, which reminded of the Atlantic coast 50 miles east.

I’d soon traversed a constellation of Florida endemic plants, but I had no idea how to call her sand pines or scrub holly by name, how her countless forbs fit within the cosmos of life twinkling around me in this wildly resilient place. I didn’t appreciate how rare it was to find her, untouched, a portal through time.

The sand ridge supporting this scrub was once a Pleistocene-era beach. Over these millions of years, several species evolved to live in Florida scrub habitat and nowhere else on Earth. Florida scrub is one of the most imperiled ecosystems in the country, partly because of the way it evolved, and partly because it is situated on the highest and driest uplands—land most desirable and least expensive to develop. At least 90% of Florida scrub has been gobbled by bulldozers, excavators, brush chippers. All of which makes it remarkable that the last rosemary scrub of Audley Way had never been developed. Surrounded by snaking subdivisions, these five acres resisted decades of conquest—until now.

Four months earlier, I’d stood at the plant sale checkout table run by my local chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society. At war with my backyard’s St. Augustine turf, I joined to snag the members-only discount. Check exchanged for pre-ordered wildflowers, I picked up three black pots and hugged them to my chest, a precarious pyramid. Ambling toward the parking lot, I overheard a man speaking to three intent listeners about a plant rescue.

I’d never heard of a plant rescue before. The words drifted from a few yards away, where the man fanned a green hose over a section of plants that seemed to sigh over their plastic edges in the late summer. I leaned in to listen from behind the cover of a trellis, curious tendrils of Carolina jessamine reaching for my cheek.

I overheard that a landowner gave permission to dig up any plants in the nine months until he would develop the property. One voice offered to host the plants at her house until they “hardened off,” meaning that they’ve survived the shock of the uprooting long enough for bits of new growth to yawn, stretch, and peek out from dormant branches. Another offered to bring empty pots and shovels. While they could do nothing to stop her destruction, they committed to

saving some of her biodiversity. I was drawn to the buzz of their collaboration, their pursuit of preservation. Looking back, I imagine I was like a butterfly, attracted to the nectar of belonging.

I stepped into view, my three pots teetering. “Could you use any help?” I asked.

The leader of the group looked at me and grinned. “Of course,” he said, waving me over.

I didn’t know a single plant name, but I could coordinate a team, arrange a database. So, I joined the plant rescue and created a coordination plan. One person to identify plants, one to dig and pot them up, and another to carry them to a staging area. I arrived armed with flags and labels, spreadsheets and instructions. Yet, as it would turn out, I didn’t understand having a connection to this place, how that connection would thread us together once my plans failed, the second we arrived. I wasn’t here to instruct, after all. A newborn, I was here to learn.

Florida scrub rosemary, or *Ceratiola ericoides*, is dense, round, evergreen. Before you see scrub rosemary, the smell of incense will likely find you. It’s hard to stand in front of scrub rosemary without feeling reverent of its ancient royalty. If, perhaps, you’re the kind of person who can stand in front of a plant like one might a painting in a museum. My first time at the rosemary scrub of Audley Way, I was not one such person.

My coordination plans were no match for the spell she had over our volunteers. They broke from our huddle like caffeinated cats, flags and roles forgotten. I trailed in one volunteer’s shadow as they explored, my mind fixed on contingencies, salvaging order.

Maybe ten minutes later, they gasped. I startled. This sound, the catnip of plant nerds, traveled through the overstory. Heads appeared, ducking under branches—then knees, carrying legs safely over the proud posturing of needle-armed cacti. Everyone assembled, necks craning to spot the interesting thing. We stood before a scrub rosemary the size of a small SUV. The base of her sweeping branches was heralded by a smooth, five-foot-wide mound of sand. Down its slope, in the shade of this ancient shrub, we watched fistful sprays of sand puff away from a half-moon hollow. Little gray feet studded in keratin scales flicked: left, right. A gopher tortoise tidied its front door, indifferent to the crowd of humans a few feet away who, in that instant, had been reborn into a fiercely committed plant rescue team.

The first time I met her, the last rosemary scrub of Audley Way, was not the first time I saw her, that Sunday morning in November. It was not the third day of the rescue, when I first cupped a *Lechea cernua* in my gloved hands, little sieves, the shrrring trickle of sand revealing the endangered plant’s spindly roots. Neither was it the first day I greeted the speckled lower jaw and satin whip of ribbon spilling up and out of *Trichostema gracile* calyxes like blue-flamed sconces. Meeting her was learning a new language I hadn’t realized I’d enrolled to learn. Becoming familiar crept over us like the change of a season, where you can’t tell where one ends and the other begins, but you can feel that something about the air is peppery, now, the blue of the sky, crisper.

We tried everything to save the scrub rosemary, crumbling pillar of this expiring place. Like many scrub plants, they cannot be transplanted; to separate them from this earth is to kill them. Their affinity for sand and heat kept them alive for millennia just as it doomed our efforts to save them. I find it comforting to think of this in human terms, with the scrub rosemary as the captain of her capsizing ship. What the surveyors of the 1800's referred to as "damnable," "miserable scrub," worthy only of leveling, to her, was home. It would not go down without her.

Our team salvaged 1,400 pots holding over 2,000 little plant lives. I went from clipboard-clutching stranger to translator, nearly free of plant-blindness chrysalis goo.

On my last visit with the rosemary scrub of Audley Way, slouched cross-legged in the sand, I pinched a pawpaw leaf between my fingers, releasing its grassy, stone fruit scent. Could she tell we were here to help? Would it ease the ache of our excavations to know her blazing stars and nodding pinweeds would have a chance to live somewhere else?

I stayed until shadows dipped into her belly, until no stacks of plastic pots or shovels remained, just a landscape pocked by holes. Gutted, us both. A year later, seeing new growth on the tips of her refugees at their recipient sites would help. Reminding myself of what we were able to save would help.

In meeting the last rosemary scrub of Audley Way, I learned an embodied language. Fluency introduced me to a new network of family: the sandhill of Wekiwa Springs State Park, the hardwood hammock of Seminole State Forest. She opened my eyes as hers were closing, transferred my hands from hers to places where I could continue the conversations she taught me. I hold these hands as I hike through my grief: to have met her is to have eclosed from plant-blindness into the roar of environmental loss.

The ancient rosemary scrub of Audley Way is gone now. The prickly leaves of her scrub wild olive and yucca, chopped into piles, discarded. An invasive species of grass, *Panicum repens*, introduced by the tractors that stripped her down, smirks across her remnant edges. The meaning behind the name of the grass, fitting my mood when I see the newest aerial, proof of her finality: creeping panic.