



THE BULLETIN...
Chapel Hill Bird Club
Special Summer Edition 2005
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c/o R. Gluck
700 Bolinwood Dr. #24-B
Chapel Hill, NC. 27514
thrush@hotmail.com

To :

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>} **Thought for the Day** >} >} >}

**‘Shock and Awe’
... In Arkansas!**

**Re-discovery of the Ivory-billed
Woodpecker**

The ‘Lord God’ bird lives! This is a *special* summer edition of *The Bulletin* of the Chapel Hill Bird Club devoted exclusively to the re-discovery of birdwatching’s ‘Holy Grail,’ in northern Arkansas -- likely the biggest North American birding story of the past half-century. What follows is a brief summary of the news out of Arkansas, a list of further information sources, and some history and “outside-the-box” thoughts/speculations about the Ivory-bill’s prospects from this editor.

-- Brief Summary of The Arkansas News --

On April 28, 2005, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in conjunction with The Nature Conservancy announced the re-discovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the Cache River NWR within the Big Woods region of northeast Arkansas, following more than a year of searching that resulted in at least 15 possible sightings of the species (seven of which were used for publication in *Science* magazine), and including one brief videotape encounter along an area bayou. The pronouncement came almost three weeks ahead of a previously-planned May 18th press release as rumors began prematurely leaking out, following a year of remarkable secrecy. (Ironically, The Nature Conservancy was the primary official group proclaiming the species extinct, back in 1996.)

Gene Sparling of Hot Springs, AR. is an unlikely hero, but to the birding world, a hero nonetheless. Many of us had long felt that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, if found at all, would be encountered, not by an active birder, few of whom ever venture into habitat likely to hold the bird, but by a backwoods fisherman/hunter or recreationalist. The 1999 purported sighting (never confirmed) of two Ivory-bills at Pearl River, La. by David Kulivan, a college

“The Ivory-bill was an extravagant creature, by all accounts, a vision in ebony and white... We cut its habitat right out from under it... We’ve sent out countless messages with our saws and our columns of smoke. Leave or die out. Find somewhere else to live. This land is our land, now. And it just doesn’t listen to us; it goes on, somewhere, I have to believe it; not dead, but missing in action; alive, defiantly, desperately, joyously, alive. No one can tell me I’m wrong, and, it seems, no one can tell me I’m right. There are those of us who cannot let it go.”

~ Julie Zickefoose, 1999

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student and hunter, filled the bill well. And so too Gene Sparling’s February 11, 2004 kayak venture through the Cache River NWR during which he believed a male Ivory-bill crossed his path:

“I was in a magical place. Deep and magical, with trees that were very old. I had just set my paddle down, thinking how lucky I was to be alive and in such a place, and that’s when the bird flew in. It gave me a long straight view as it flew toward me.”

And when Sparling arrived home he buried two cryptic sentences in a message posted to an internet canoe listserv group to see what response there might be:

“I saw a large woodpecker and the black-and-white pattern seems reversed. You birders out there know what this implies.”

Additionally, he emailed a report to Mary Scott of ‘www.birdingAmerica.com’(website), who forwarded his account to Tim Gallagher at Cornell’s Lab of Ornithology. Gallagher and friend Bobby Harrison soon ventured to the area for a look-see and on their second day (Feb. 27) saw the bird fly right in front of them.

What followed over a year’s time were 13 additional sightings in the same general area (Ivory-bill sounds and bark scrapings were also detected). Prominent among them was a brief encounter by David Luneau, a University of Arkansas professor, and lifelong searcher of Ivory-bills who had long touted the suitability of certain Arkansas habitat for the species. On April 25, 2004, he canoed the area with a videocam running and was able to capture 4 seconds of footage of a large

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black-and-white bird that flew up-and-away from the side of a tree trunk ahead of him. Later enhanced analysis of the video clip determined the bird to be an Ivory-billed Woodpecker (the first one caught on film in almost 70 years). Tim Gallagher's recent book on the Arkansas search mistakenly identifies this particular bird as a female Ivory-bill, but in fact all the sightings reported by Cornell, were regarded as either male or indeterminate sex, leaving open the question of whether multiple individuals were being spotted or a single male being seen repeatedly.

The Big Woods area of northeast Arkansas is a vast (~550,000 acres) area of Mississippi River bottomland forest. (The Cache River NWR, where the Ivory-bills were reported, is a fraction of the greater region.) Indeed, the question, in retrospect, is why was such an excellent chunk of bottomland habitat so largely ignored by most Ivory-bill searchers in the past? The prior focus on the southern edge of the Ivory-bill's former known range seems to have blinded people to scrutinizing choice habitat at the northern edge of that range.

The Cornell search team departed the region shortly after their official announcement, but plans to return in winter and continue their study of the area. (Summer, with its heat/humidity, mosquitoes, snakes, and dense foliage, is not an opportune time for productive searching.) Moreover, a far wider, organized search for any remaining Ivory-bills is now planned for several other southern states in the species' one-time range. How unfortunate that it took THIS long for the professional ornithology community to deem such an undertaking worthwhile. Just possibly it is still not too late to bring this evocative species, that generates such strong emotion among birders, back from a Man-made abyss.

--- For more details on the Arkansas finding and other Ivory-bill info, including updates and logistical search info, visit the following websites:

1. <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/ivory/?lk=left>
(Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology site)
2. <http://www.fws.gov/ivorybill/WoodpeckerUpdate.pdf>
(weekly updates from US Fish and Wildlife, in pdf form)
3. <http://www.ivorybill.org>
(site of The Big Woods Conservation Partnership)
4. <http://www.nature.org> (site for The Nature Conservancy)
5. <http://www.fws.gov/ivorybill> (US Fish and Wildlife site)
6. <http://www.agfc.com/ivorybilled/#>
(Arkansas Game and Fish Commission site)
7. <http://www.ibwo.org>
(site run by David Luneau, a principal searcher)
8. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4622633> (site for National Public Radio)

see also, Science magazine, Vol. 308, Issue 5727, June 3, 2005

>>Books of special interest include:

- The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker**
 ~ Tim Gallagher
- The Race to Save the Lord God Bird** ~ Phillip Hoose
- The Search For the Ivory-billed Woodpecker** ~ Jerome Jackson
- The Ivory-billed Woodpecker** (re-published Dover edition)
 ~ James Tanner

----- -- A Little History --

James Tanner wrote the "definitive" study of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in N. America in 1942 as a doctoral thesis at Cornell. His is a meticulous and wonderful study of... the half-dozen Ivory-bills he specifically observed over time at the Singer Tract in Louisiana. While he gathered information and anecdotes on Ivory-bills from throughout the Southeast, Tanner's actual observations were restricted to a small sample of birds at a single La. location, making the generalizability of his findings and conclusions somewhat suspect. Conclusions about Ivory-bill behavior, and dietary and habitat needs are based largely upon what the birds at the Singer Tract appeared to utilize and enjoy, which is NOT NECESSARILY the same as what the species REQUIRED for survival.

As Tanner himself stated, so accurately,

"The chief difficulty of the study has been that of drawing conclusions from relatively few observations... entirely confined to a few individuals in one part of Louisiana... The conclusions drawn from them will not necessarily apply to the species as it once was nor to individuals living in other areas."

Yet, in ensuing years these words were largely ignored as ornithologists turned Tanner's doctoral work into gospel criteria for all Ivory-billed Woodpeckers.

At the time of his studies, Tanner concluded that fewer than 30 Ivory-bills remained in the entire Southeast scattered amongst just three states: Louisiana, Florida, and S. Carolina. In fact, some believe there may have been 200+ Ivory-bills left in the 30's dispersed across a much wider area in very small groups. Further, Tanner believed a single pair of the birds needed a minimum of 6 square miles of forest tract for survival even though the only slightly smaller-sized Pileated could reside on far less territory. Almost certainly non-breeding, juvenile Ivory-bills could make do with much smaller tracts of land while biding time. It is simply difficult to tease out what the bird merely 'preferred' from what it truly 'needed' to survive.

Since the late 1940's hundreds of Ivory-bill "reports" have come in, the vast majority being cases of mistaken identity or outright hoaxes. Still, several dozen sightings over the years bear enough credibility as not to be easily dismissable. And one must wonder how many other sightings have been made over time by

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people (non-birders) who didn't have a clue what they were seeing, nor that it was worth reporting... *OR*, by people who knew EXACTLY what they were seeing and deliberately chose NOT to report it for fear of the scoffing judgments that would be cast their way? My guess is we would be stunned if we knew the actual number of Ivory-bill encounters that have occurred in recent decades, while "experts" were cavalierly pronouncing the species extinct!

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-- Some Things Worth Noting, and Further (...Insanely Optimistic!) Speculations --

1. In its heyday the Ivory-billed Woodpecker was known to reside in upland pine forests in Cuba, cypress swamps in Florida, and bottomland mixed hardwoods in Louisiana and elsewhere -- three rather different habitats. This was almost certainly a more adaptable species than often portrayed. For food and nesting purposes, yes, it did need relatively large, mature tracts of forest, but climate and tree-type may not have been strict limiting factors even if the bird had preferences.

2. Similarly, the few studies of Ivory-bill stomach contents available indicated that the species' diet was about 60% vegetable matter and 40% or less animal matter and only a small percentage of the animal portion consisted of the wood-boring beetle larvae which Tanner pointed to as yet a further 'specialization' of this bird. In short, while Ivory-bills clearly enjoyed certain components of their diet when available, it is again less clear how *necessary* those components were for survival, the bird likely being more of a feeding 'generalist' than implied in much of the literature (indeed, *no other* woodpecker or bird species sharing the same habitat of the Ivory-bill appeared to have any such 'specialized' dietary needs, and one is left to wonder why the Ivory-bill would be different).

In short, unlike the tentative conclusions that Tanner reached which later hardened into standard presumptions, the Ivory-bill may have been an adaptable species if only given enough time and solitude to do so.

3. Ivory-bills were widely hunted for food, ornamental purposes, and for both private and public collections/displays (and their eggs collected as well). It is impossible to know just how many individual birds fell victim to this fate. Tanner believed hunting was second only to habitat loss in its effect on the species' population. I believe, even at that, the overall impact of hunting may be vastly underestimated, given that Ivory-bills were never abundant to begin with. As relatively long-lived birds (estimated 10 to 20+ year lifespan), laying 3-5 eggs per nest, Ivory-bills had ample opportunity to more than 'replace' themselves in their lifetimes (only two offspring reaching maturity required to replace a living pair), *except* when hunting cut their lives short.

4. The discovery of the species in the state of Arkansas is especially noteworthy as Arkansas was rarely high on lists of promising search locales. Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana, were better prospects in most searchers' minds. South Carolina and Texas were likely better as well. Georgia and Alabama remain yet other potential states for hidden Ivory-bills. But significantly, finding the Ivory-bill in Arkansas, at the northern end of its one-time range, opens the door wide to yet other possibilities, including southern Missouri, southern Illinois, Tennessee, and Kentucky. In short, besides Arkansas there are probably 10 or more states bearing some potential of harboring Ivory-bills. This is a bird that has had 60+ years to wander in search of food and habitat, and there is little basis for assuming it would be automatically restrained to its former 200 year-ago range boundaries.

There is no large 'corridor' of dense forest left in the south for the Ivory-bill to move along as existed in the nation's early days. Yet for Ivory-bills to still be found at all today implies that far greater numbers persisted in various locales in the 1930's than Tanner estimated. There likely existed (both then and now) forest 'patches' in multiple states that were adequate to sustain one or two pair of the species, such that offspring could mature before dispersing out to seek new such patches for themselves. (Indeed one of the most intriguing facts to this writer has long been the number of scoffed-at 'sightings' in previous decades occurring near or over major roadways/highways, NOT in deep woods -- individual birds dispersing to new areas???). In this way, small numbers of Ivory-bills would be 'hop-scotching' around the south for the last century, not just gradually inching toward some final stronghold. With hunting and collecting pressure *finally* off the birds, the existence of such patches might well be sufficient to permit a population to stabilize and commence a comeback (Ivory-bills having few predators in the past other than Man). And, as Jerome Jackson has oft-noted, there is literally MORE suitable habitat available for the Ivory-bill today than existed decades ago at the height of forest destruction.

The 'will to live' and to reproduce is a persistent, potent force among living things. While the shooting of Ivory-bills essentially took individuals out of the population immediately, habitat loss, per se, had NO SUCH immediate effect for a creature that needed only to flap its wings to seek out new territory and then make new adaptations issuing from that 'will to live.' The genes and behaviors of any birds thusly adapting might then be passed on to a new generation, however few in number. We have, in essence, a 70-year unaccounted-for gap in our knowledge since the last known population of Ivory-bills at the Singer Tract was studied. A gap of hugely unacknowledged uncertainties.

In short, the likelihood that several dozen Ivory-bills persist in southern wilds seems to this writer FAR GREATER than the probability that humans, in our

clumsiness, have stumbled upon the last 1 or 2 in existence. My own belief (based on previous distribution pattern, report history, remaining habitat, and time elapsed) is that *at a minimum* there are pockets of Ivory-bills in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, AND Texas, with other states that border on these, possible micro-havens as well. Actually finding the shy, elusive birds anytime soon however, is another matter entirely, for which I hold less optimism, although the re-kindled interest in the species will help. ...One must even wonder if the birds may be better off UN-found. Or can we humans at long last do right by this iconic creature of the American South; this majestic and aloof phantom of the forest depths? ...Lord God, one hopes so!

Test Your Ivory-bill Knowledge...

(answers at very end of newsletter)

- Ivory-billed and Pileated Woodpeckers differ on all of the following characteristics, except:
 - tail color
 - facial pattern
 - underwing pattern
 - bill size
 - their call
- The 1944 sighting of an Ivory-bill at the Singer Tract in La. that was often cited as the last agreed-upon documented sighting was made by:
 - John Terres
 - James Tanner
 - Roger Tory Peterson
 - Donald Eckelberry
 - Arthur A. Allen
- The original known range of the Ivory-bill in N. America included all of the following states except:
 - North Carolina
 - Oklahoma
 - Tennessee
 - Illinois
 - Virginia
- The Ivory-billed Woodpecker call has been compared to a loud version of the call of a:
 - White-breasted Nuthatch
 - Red-bellied Woodpecker
 - Pileated Woodpecker
 - Red-tailed Hawk
 - Great-crested Flycatcher
- The Ivory-bill's closest cousin, that resided in Mexico and is also considered extinct, was the:
 - King Woodpecker
 - Emperor Woodpecker
 - Imperial Woodpecker
 - Royal Woodpecker
 - Regal Woodpecker
- How many Ivory-bill specimens/skins remain today in museum collections worldwide?
 - ~ 10
 - ~ 50
 - ~ 100
 - ~ 400
 - ~ 900
- In the 1930's when the Cornell group went to the Singer Tract to study Ivory-bills they named their camp "Camp Ephelus" after:
 - the grandmother of researcher Arthur A. Allen
 - the La. county that the Singer Tract was in
 - the name of the game warden who gave permission for extended stay and research in the Singer Tract
 - the Latin name for the bird's genus
 - the species of ground cover prevalent where the researchers camped/slept
- Ornithologist John Dennis became famous for, and virtually ruined his reputation over, claims he made of Ivory-bills existing in the:
 - Everglades region of Florida
 - Big Thicket of Texas
 - Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia
 - Pearl River area of La.
 - Mississippi delta region
- In April 1999, student David Kulivan claimed he saw a pair of Ivory-bills in the Pearl River region of La. while he was in the woods:
 - hiking/backpacking
 - collecting mushrooms
 - on a class assignment
 - searching for his Beagle
 - turkey hunting
- In 1986 the US Government sought to declare the Ivory-bill extinct but one member of a 3-man expert panel refused to go along and the bird was therefore kept on the 'endangered' list. That panelist was:
 - Les Short
 - James Tanner
 - Jerome Jackson
 - James Van Remsen
 - John Terres

Parting Words...

"...for now, we can savor the satisfaction of this joyous discovery, a validation of two undeniable truths. The first, of course, is that where there is life, there's hope. The second, no less profound, is that we have no earthly idea what goes on in the backwoods of Arkansas."

~ an internet blogger following official announcement of the Ivory-bill's re-discovery

Visit the CHBC on the Web at : <http://chbc.carolinanature.com>

not already a member??? join by sending \$15 (\$10/ student), your name and address, to :

CHBC, c/o Ruth Roberson, 38 Stoneridge Pl., Durham, NC. 27705

Test answers:

1-a, 2-d, 3-e, 4-a, 5-c, 6-d, 7-d, 8-b, 9-e, 10-c

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