

The Search for the Ghost Bird

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There have been reports of a large bird, perched on the side of trees, ramming his beak into the wood with a large crack that echoes throughout the forest. It is just a simple woodpecker, nothing to be excited about. Yet, the researchers go to investigate.. As they canoe through the river, their cameras filming constantly at the banks, there is a sudden movement as a black and white bird takes off and heads deeper into the forest. The two men are shocked. In fact, all of the ornithologists of the world are too. There is videographic proof of an ivory-billed woodpecker, a bird that hasn't been confirmed alive for 60 years.

The ivory-billed woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) is in the family of picidae (woodpeckers) and the order of piciformes, which includes honeyguides and toucans.[1][2] With an approximate height of 19.1 inches, a wingspan of 30.7 inches, and a weight of 18 oz, they are one of the largest woodpeckers. They live all year round in the southeast of the United States and Cuba.[1][3] Their feet have two toes in the front and two in the back, allowing them to cling onto the side of trees. They hit repeatedly into the wood with their long, sturdy beaks to create holes from which they could obtain insects. Their nests are cavities inside trees which they sometime dig out themselves.

Being very dependent on woodlands for their food and procreation, the development of timber companies in the south sparked the beginning of their fall. Ivory-billed woodpeckers lived in bottomland hardwoods, preferring the countless dead and dying trees that produced their favorite food, beetle larvae.[4] During and after the Civil War, the timber industry boomed as the growing nation needed more wood. [4][5] Bird collectors and hunters found the bird's size, plumage, and its beak to be a great prize, further decreasing the population.

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In the early 1900s, concern for the bird spread and conservatives pleaded for a change in the south. Rumor of an 80,000 acre tract held the last of the ivory-bill population which was proven true when one was shot and killed in 1932. However, the area was owned by the Singer Sewing Machine Company, therefore, giving the land the name Singer Tract. From 1937 to 1939, James Tanner researched the birds, estimating 22 to 24 birds were living there, and only there; he could not find ivory-bills anywhere else. He devised a plan to reserve the area by cutting certain trees and leaving others. Even with money, Chicago Mill, which now owned the tract, refused to agree. In January, 1944, Richard Plough, who was sent to Singer Tract, saw the last ivory-bill. Don Eckelberry, a wildlife artist, rushed there where he spent two weeks following and painting the bird until, he saw the trees that the ivory-bill used were cut down. It marked the last sighting of the bird in the United States.[6][7] In 1948, John Dennis and Davis Crompton went on a bird search in the Oriente region and were appalled by the sight. Dennis described the land of cut down pines as “being like hell on earth.” They found a breeding pair of ivory-bills in a dead pine tree and took a picture, providing the last scientifically accepted photographs and the last confirmed sighting ever.[8] In 2002, there was hope when David Kulivan, a forestry major at a nearby college, spotted two odd woodpeckers at the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area in Southern Mississippi but didn’t take a photo. Many were convinced he saw two ivory-bills. Search teams flooded the area in hopes of recording a call or the double knock of the bird’s digging but the expedition was deemed a failure.[9] Birders desperately searched for them and reports came in of their distinctive “kent” call and even actual sightings. However, without photos, it was impossible to consider that there was a population left. Frustrated ornithologists began calling ivory-bills “Ghost Birds” due to their elusiveness.

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In April of 2005, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology released a surprising discovery; the ivory-billed woodpeckers were not extinct. There were carefully described sightings, suggestive audio recordings, but their biggest proof is a video of the woodpecker. The Luneau video was filmed on April 25, 2005 as David Luneau and Robert Henderson cannoned around Bayou De View, a part of the Cache River, in Arkansas. There appears to be a large black and white bird flying from a low part of the tree and into the forest. After analyzing, the flight pattern, size, shape, and markings, it was concluded that this was an ivory-billed woodpecker.[10] With the evidence, the bird was taken off of the extinct list and officially considered critically endangered.[11]

The rediscovery of the ivory-bill was a joyous occasion for every ornithologist. With conservation efforts, a great American bird had been brought back from extinction. Yet, there was still a lot of skepticism. Ivory-billed woodpeckers and pileated woodpeckers have very similar sizes, the pileated only being an inch smaller in both height and wingspan, and nearly the same exact look. Pileated have a more northern range but still occupy the southeast.[12] The supposed ivory-billed woodpecker in the Luneau video is said to actually be a pileated woodpecker. A frame by frame analysis done by Yale shows that the plumage on the wings clearly points it to being a pileated. Otherwise, due to the lower quality of the video, it is unsafe to say that it is indeed the extinct bird.[13] Though other sightings are reported, it is continued to be believed in part of the ornithologist community that the birds are not back. There is a \$50,000 reward by the Nature Conservancy for someone who manages to provide indisputable evidence of a living ivory-bill, which sits unclaimed.[14]

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If we are to get proof that an ivory-bill exists, the forests must be conserved first. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has the Strategic Habitat Conservation in effect for the southeast, focused on protecting the forested wetlands and bottomland hardwood forests through forest management, similar to Tanner's idea. With partners, they've also helped with bird tracking through the area.[15] They are with the United States Department of Agriculture to help develop the "Corridor of Hope," the area in Arkansas where ivory-bills have been spotted.[16] Their conservations have worked as there were many sightings in 2007 but, unfortunately, not photographed.[17]

Many of these conservation efforts have last been updated before 2010. The rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker has practically lost its steam as no photographic proof has shown up yet. Yet, there is still more we can do. The story of the woodpecker shows how extinction didn't just happen to the dinosaurs and prehistoric animals; it is happening right now. The younger generation must be taught about the importance of animals in our environment and what they can do to help save them. An example of this effort would be the book *Big Woods Bird: An Ivory-Bill Story* by Terri Roberts Luneau and Trevor Bennett. The book is for children and includes lesson plans to teach kids about habitat conservation.[18] Over the summer, I have personally volunteered at the Milford Point Audubon in Connecticut as an educator and camp counselor. I have taught the young campers all about birds and their delightment on their faces as they go on adventures to see the wetlands and beach animals give me hope that there will be a future for our environment and they'll be the ones who lead it. I am in a program at the Yale Peabody Museum where we have made an exhibit about how collections have helped save species and develop research. The museum collection even owns a few ivory-bill specimens

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which I have been allowed to see up close. I have the opportunity over the summer to even volunteer and then work in the museum, teaching visitors about birds and other animals. I am also planning to take up an internship with ornithologists there to hopefully learn more about extinct birds.

Otherwise, we need to look past ivory-billed woodpeckers. Our efforts should not be focused all around them; there are other birds that need our help. While the similar pileated woodpeckers are of least concern, red-cockaded woodpeckers and red-headed woodpeckers, both which happen to live in the same exact region as the ivory-bills, are near threatened species. Though they are vastly different sizes and eat differently, they still depend on the woodlands for food and shelter.[19][20] We should not only focus on the ivory-bill for they may not even truly be alive. Prevention needs to happen for the red-cockaded and red-headed so they may not meet the same fate.

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