

What the Ivory-bill is telling us

By **M. G. Criscitiello**, MD/ Special To The Tab
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On April 28 this year, when Cornell scientists revealed the secret that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers had been spotted in an Arkansas swamp in early 2004, the news hit the front pages everywhere. Recent recordings of their call notes have convinced even the most skeptical that this elegant creature, long considered, extinct, still lives!

The news was especially exciting for me. It brought back the poignant moment, some months earlier, when I had held a specimen skin of this majestic creature in my own hand! It was larger than expected, big as a crow, and its feathers were still bright despite years in a darkened museum drawer. The fiery red crest, the brilliant stripes running down the sides of the neck, converging to form a broad white shield on the black back - these were markings quite different from those of its pileated cousin. Most striking was the impressive strong, white bill which gives the bird its name. A tag on its leg bore the date "1911," the year it had met its fate in a Florida swamp. Inscribed also was the name of the naturalist who had shot it and later bequeathed it to the museum's collection. Officials there had allowed me to examine some of their prized examples of "*Campephilus principalis*." The name, roughly speaking, means "lover of grubs, chief of its tribe." It had once been a fairly widespread, free-ranging inhabitant of southern bottomland forests.



Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were spotted in an Arkansas swamp in early 2004. (Photo Courtesy Of Cornell Lab Of Ornithology)

My interest in the "ivory-bill" dates from 1935 when, as a boy, I learned that a team of Cornell ornithologists was searching the swamps of the Southeast for the very few remaining. Notice had been given of its dwindling population, and the aim was to take photos, record its voice and study its habits in hopes of finding some way to restore its numbers. Not one was seen until the group reached an area near the Tansas River in Louisiana. A few pairs were located there in a wetland forest of towering oak and sweetgums, set aside by the Singer Company as a source of wood for its sewing machine cabinets. Cumbersome equipment was lugged by mule cart into this swamp, and the bird's calls and its typical "doublet" drumming beat were recorded for posterity.

The study, extending over three years, revealed discouraging data. The bird's chief food consisted mostly of larvae of a particular kind of wood-boring beetle, retrieved by tearing off strips of bark from still-standing dead trees and probing for the grubs underneath. Fallen trees were generally not approached, and dead ones remaining upright were few and far between. James Tanner, Cornell's on-site investigator, estimated that each nesting pair required a minimum of 2.5-3 square miles of forest to meet its needs. These findings, in the face of rapid disappearance of these bottomland forests, seemed to seal its doom. During World War II, the rate of cutting accelerated, and by mid-century, these southern primeval forests, accept for scattered remnants, had all been harvested. Until February 2004, the last reliable sighting was that of a lone female in

1944. (To check the 1935 Cornell Study, with photos, recorded calls, etc. see: <http://www.npr.org/programs/re/archivesdate/2002/march>). A subspecies of the Ivory-bill had been known to exist in the easternmost forests of Cuba, but the last of these was seen in 1987.

"The Race to Save the Lord God Bird" by Phillip Hoose, a full report of the struggle to save this bird, tells a story of heroes and villains. Among the latter were the bird-skin collectors and their hired gunners, who, perhaps unwittingly, continued to track down these woodpeckers despite severely declining numbers. Most of all, he faults the owners of lumber companies intent on harvesting all trees in the southern climax forests. Appeals to save areas as preserves for the ivory-bill went unheard -- the rich market for valuable wood trumped all calls for caution. Today, in place of those great trees of the Singer tract are vast fields of soybeans. Loss of the water-holding capacity of former wetlands has now led to increased problems of flood control in the region. Continued replacement of such lands for agricultural or industrial use, there and elsewhere in the world, is taking its toll.

Ironically, while media attention was focused on one end-of-life story in Florida, the remarkable March 30 report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx) missed the headlines. It summarized the results of a joint effort of 1,360 specialists in 95 nations, warning that "human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted." In other words, besides a grim outlook for huge numbers of plants, animals, fish and other organisms, survival of the human species itself is increasingly under threat. Those of us who continue to think of the "environment" as something surrounding us but not including us - something "out there" consisting only of mountains, forests, wetlands, lakes and the like - are missing the point. We are messing up the very ecosystems we are part of.

We rejoice at having the ivory-bill still with us, but one big message it offers is this: - "Look, folks, we're all in this together. Listen to my story and take better care of our habitat!"

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