

Ivory-Billed Woodpeckers, UFOs, and Elvis

The recent rediscovery of an extinct bird smells funny. By Barney Nelson, Ph.D.

With amazing timing, just as The Nature Conservancy's problems with both the Senate Finance Committee and the Internal Revenue Service are coming to a head, the ivory-billed woodpecker was rediscovered in Arkansas proclaiming TNC's heroic efforts to purchase its habitat before making the news public. Hmmm.

On Feb. 11, 2004, a lone kayaker supposedly spotted a long-extinct ivory-billed woodpecker in an Arkansas swamp. Instead of rushing home and screaming the news to the local newspapers, he timidly sent an e-mail claiming to have seen an unusually marked pileated woodpecker. The e-mail was forwarded by "someone" to Tim Gallagher, an award-winning author and editor of a major bird publication published by Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology. The Nature Conservancy became involved almost simultaneously and the discovery soon blossomed into a top-secret quest to resurrect the ivory-bill with Cornell's Ornithology Lab and The Nature Conservancy forming the Big Woods Partnership.

The sighting was not made public for over a year. This delay wasted extremely valuable time for other university ornithologists or expert birders who could have rushed to the site to help confirm or debunk the sighting. When the big news was finally made public, a very poor quality, blurry video—reminiscent of Big Foot?—was released as "proof." The delay also allowed time for Gallagher to write a book, "The Grail Bird" (Houghton Mifflin), which miraculously came hot off the presses at almost the same moment the find was made public. Hmmm.

Since that moment, over \$10 million in federal funds (your tax dollars at work) and another \$10 million from private organizations have already been poured into saving the rediscovered extinct bird, not to mention the number of scientific proposals that have been quickly funded, or the tourist dollars that have poured into Arkansas. Bird experts from Yale



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN BARDWELL

and other universities initially challenged the find and were about to publish a paper explaining their reservations. However, after hearing a faint audio recording of the ivory-bill's double rap as it pecked on a tree, they withdrew their challenge even though the Cornell team admits that their "evidence is 'suggestive,' and isn't what they'd like it to be." They claim that "the bird or birds are skittish and quiet" and admit that "the video is short and blurry and the audio recordings are faint." So, they promise that "teams are planning to return to Arkansas this fall."

During the 1930s, when a tiny remnant of ivory-bills still actually existed and our southern swamps were much wilder than they are today, James Tanner was able to find and photograph six pairs of ivory-bills, identify the

areas they inhabited, locate their nests, photograph young, constantly hear their raps and calls, and easily find field sign of extensive bark scaling. But he found no ivory-bills in Arkansas.

Back in the current century, only seven sightings, always of a single bird, have been recognized as "confirmed." Yet the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has been inundated by callers claiming to have sighted an ivory-bill. Sightings are not a new phenomenon in Arkansas. Arkansas is actually somewhat famous in scientific circles for "sightings." One memorable paper by J.A. Sealander and P.S. Gibson claimed the resurrection of the eastern cougar in 1973. Their study, published in the Arkansas Academy of Science Proceedings, included sightings by professional zoolo-

gists, trappers, wildlife officers, biologists, state troopers, wildlife refuge managers, and even the chief naturalist for Arkansas State Parks. It was accompanied by a map designating the locations of five breeding populations.

So the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission called in master trackers and puma experts Roy and Rowdy McBride. “Nope,” they said, “no pumas here.”

How could only two puma experts make that determination in such swampy, forested, difficult terrain? Tracks. Physical sign: scrapes, kills, scat. They investigated 65 sightings and reclassified the accompanying “physical evidence” as coyote, dog, bobcat, or black bear. A single puma, they explained, will lay down thousands of tracks in only one night of hunting. A breeding population will literally lace an area with tracks, easily found when searched for by trained observers who know where to look. Their paper was published in the 47th Annual Conference of Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in 1993, and sightings of pumas quieted down for a while.

Wildlife professionals use puma sightings only as a guide to search for physical sign. Sightings of pumas are considered no more reliable than sightings of UFOs or Elvis, all of which are often accompanied by blurry photographs, videos, or faint sound recordings. When rare sightings are actually confirmed, the mystery puma is usually traced to an escaped pet imported from elsewhere.

Wendell Neal (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, retired), in a paper attempting to debunk once and for all the tendency of Arkansans to “see” cougars and especially “them big ol’ black ’uns,” said he would “have been no less surprised if the sighting had been of Sasquatch.” His paper gradually degenerates into eloquent rural southern humor as he brings in snake charmers, rural medicines for snakebite, the inordinate number of panthers sighted by preachers, and conflicting theories about holler holes. He attributes the sightings to everything from escaped pets to pure imagination or one-upmanship, as in “I seen one and you didn’t.” He admits that even his own grandma was prone to seeing things when she’d eaten “too many squirrel brains and drank too much muscadine wine.”

Are we to believe that U.S. ornithologists do not possess the debunking skills that puma experts have? Even amateur birders are rabid about confirming their sightings. Are we to believe that the same people who flock to a tiny, remote canyon of Big Bend National Park to record the much quieter, much smaller, and much less conspicuous Colima warbler for their life list would not be able to find a single

ivory-billed woodpecker for 60 years?

The birders’ grapevine shares information almost moment by moment as they spot and report the whereabouts of single specimens of rare or even migrating birds. Also, closely related woodpeckers with similar plumage, raps and calls still exist in South America, and humans are notorious for illegally smuggling rare birds into the United States. Granted, the distance between pairs of ivory-bills has always been great, so only a few birds cover large areas. But in order for ivory-bills to have survived, ornithologists are not looking for one lone last bird, but for a breeding population large enough to keep inbreeding from blinking out the species—a breeding population large enough to do that was not even found by Tanner in the 1930s.

Granted also, the ivory-bill was spotted in a swamp, but birders in deepest, darkest Florida have no problem finding rare and endangered birds. During a walk through Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary an amateur birder’s experience will be marred by the presence

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of 10 binocular-draped professional birders for every bird. They are often noisily broadcasting each turn of the bird’s head or flight from tree to tree to one another via modern technology. Are we to believe that the same people who can count migrating female hummingbirds could not find the loudest, gaudiest crown jewel of North American birds for 60 years? Even with winter’s leaf drop to help spotters, the physical sign offered to back up the ivory-bill’s resurrection has been a little bark stripped from trees (pileated woodpeckers also strip bark) and a large nest hole (that looks more the size of a pileated’s hole than an ivory-bill’s). And in these days of digital technology, when reclusive rare cats from jaguarundi to snow leopard have been professionally filmed via camera traps, are we to accept an out-of-focus video for such an important find? Hmmm.

Granted, rediscoveries of extinct species do happen. The black-footed ferret had been declared extinct by scientists until a Wyoming ranch dog fetched one home in 1981. The woolly flying squirrel, presumed extinct for 70 years, reappeared in the Himalayas in 1995. Two Indian forest owlets were photographed in India in 1996 after being listed among the missing since 1804. The Edwards pheasant, the ink monkey, the Borneo river shark, the pigmy blue-tongued lizard, Tibet wapiti, and Polynesian tree snails have all miraculously reappeared after scientists had engraved their tombstones.

Perhaps the most amazing resurrection ever was the blue fish with white spots—the coelacanth—which had supposedly disappeared with the dinosaurs but suddenly reappeared off Mozambique and rose to an estimated population of 500 only three years later. The 1990s were such an amazing decade for reappearances of extinct species that writer Robert W. Lee thought all “resurrectees” should be reclassified as “Marktwainus remindus.” Are modern scientists spending too much time with their computers instead of trampling through swamps and climbing mountains?

Four years ago federal and state wildlife scientists also embarrassed their profession when they “found” lynx hair on rubbing posts and were accused of trying to falsely establish the presence of lynx in two national forests in Washington in order to prevent recreation, logging, mining, and grazing [“Cat Fight” by Jeff Goodson, Spring 2002]. In the end, many of their colleagues, concerned about protecting science’s reputation, protecting their own funding, and possibly knowing full well that much research cannot stand close scrutiny, explained away the ethical disaster by allowing the guilty parties to claim they were only “secretly” testing the accuracy of the diagnostic lab. However, other scientists said their actions put the credibility of wildlife science on the line, that the public trust had been hard won, and that they needed to refresh their acquaintance with the ethical standards of their profession. At the time Scott McInnis (R-Colo.) was quoted as saying: “If biologists can commit blatant fraud and get rewarded, what’s to protect the American people from politically motivated land manage-

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To view the out-of-focus video and photos comparing the size of the nest cavity of pileated woodpeckers to ivory bills, see www.Ivorybill.org. To read the Cornell team’s official “peer-reviewed” paper announcing the discovery and the acknowledgements explaining every author’s connections to TNC, see www.sciencemag.org/cgi/rapidpdf/1114103v.1. To read about the lawsuit attempting to use the ivory bill to stop the transfer of water across state lines from Arkansas to Louisiana rice farmers, see www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/08AR2005090802289.html.

WOODPECKER

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ment decisions?" Indeed.

It seems almost too much of a coincidence that rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker came about at the perfect moment to overshadow calls to reform the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and give TNC some much needed positive headlines. The timing was also perfect for environmentalists to file a federal lawsuit trying to stop a project designed to divert annually over 100 billion gallons of water to 1,000 rice farms along the White River where The Nature Conservancy already owns 120,000 acres and plans to purchase 200,000 more. Two previous lawsuits that tried to stop the water diversion project had failed, but lawyers have appealed the case since the timely announcement of the ivory-bill's resurrection.

Finally, of the 17 authors who signed their names to the "peer-reviewed" article published on an Internet site called "SciencExpress" on April 28, 2005, only one seems to be a bird "scientist." The rest are from museums, departments of communications or engineering, writers, or film producers from "Birdman Productions."

All authors are also somehow connected directly, indirectly, or even employed by The Nature Conservancy. The lone bird scientist, John W. Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Ornithology Lab, is a past member of TNC's board of governors, a trustee of the Florida TNC chapter, and a donor. Gallagher, who works for Fitzpatrick, is listed as an author. Seven more authors are evidently employees of Fitzpatrick's lab. One author lists his address as the Institute for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Dynamics in Amsterdam and his wife is employed as a research technician for TNC. Three more authors, including the kayaker, hold contracts with TNC to perform inventories of the ivory-bill's "study area." The final two authors list their address as TNC's Arkansas chapter.

As an academic, I would not call this science, or a peer-reviewed article, or even peer written! I would think this "publication" would embarrass a distinguished university like Cornell. Is all this just a coincidence or yet another example of using the ESA for purposes beyond its scope, or of scientists corrupted or at least blinded by their advocacy? Or is it maybe just a well-orchestrated major publicity stunt designed to save The Nature Conservancy's tainted reputation and sell Gallagher's new book? Hmmm. ■

Dr. Barney Nelson is a writer, photographer and teacher. She lives in Alpine, Texas.