

Pennsylvania-based Research Re-discovers “Extinct” Ivory-billed Woodpecker

by Bob Ross

The ivory-billed woodpecker, long-thought extinct, has been found to be alive and well—at least a few—by our very own Pennsylvanian, Steve Latta. The largest woodpecker in North America, the ivory-billed woodpecker (see images below) historically ranged from the Carolinas to Texas and up the Mississippi River to the lower Ohio River. It was last seen (with widely accepted documentation) in 1944 in Louisiana after the last extensive tract of virgin bottomland forest was cut. Since then, sporadic reports of the “Lord God bird” (named for the response of people seeing one nearby) have surfaced, but no credible evidence such as photos or physical remains have been produced.

Then, two decades ago, various observations by Tim Gallagher (editor of *Living Bird* magazine), some backwoodsmen, and a local college professor were taken seriously. The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology sent a field team to the White River site in Arkansas to attempt further documentation. Despite careful analysis of their best photo obtained and testimony by knowledgeable ornithology students, the bird’s existence there was still not widely accepted by the scientific community. Gallagher’s popular book about his experiences chasing the bird, titled *The Grail Bird*, was published in 2006.

The ivory-billed woodpecker is indeed the “Holy Grail” of rare birds in North America and on the wish list of most birders. Twenty inches long with a 30-inch wingspan, it is among the largest of woodpeckers in the world: those of the genus *Campephilus* (“grub loving”). Only the imperial woodpecker of Mexico (probably now extinct) among Western Hemisphere woodpeckers is larger. The nearly as large pileated woodpecker of North America is a similar-looking bird that is relatively common throughout the U.S. It is the bird usually seen by hopeful observers of the ivorybill. The feet and claws of the ivorybill are also much larger than those of the pileated. If so, I would not want to be mistaken by either bird as a grub-laden tree trunk to land on!

Enter Steve Latta. Steve served with me two decades ago on the ornithology committee of the Pennsylvania Biological Survey, which advises state natural-resource agencies on the status of species under their jurisdiction. As the lead conservationist at the National Aviary in Pittsburgh, Steve became interested in the plight of the nearly extinct ivorybill and acquired funding to look for and obtain evidence of its continued existence in Louisiana bottomland forests. After a 10-year effort, he has done just that! His peer-reviewed paper with nine co-authors, published last year in the scientific journal *Ecology and Evolution* <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/16/us/ivory-billed-woodpecker-not-extinct-yet-climate/index.html>, provides trail-camera, sound-recording, and video evidence using drones on multiple individual ivorybills in their forested study site. Colorful closeup photos of the bird, which we see in many slick birding/wildlife magazines, were not obtained by the research team. But field marks and behavior that identify these birds, such as black leading and white trailing wing feathers in flight and large white saddles/triangles in perching birds, were obtained.

Why have closeup photos of these birds not been obtained in the eight decades since the last clearly documented bird? Two possible reasons. The nearly extinct bird has only survived the chainsaw, shotgun, and human disturbance by staying as far away from man as possible. And try to canoe through some of its prime habitat: mosquito-infested swamps with shallow-water obstacles requiring frequent fords while carrying heavy cameras and equipment to get to wary birds that take flight suddenly if encountered!

This decade-long research effort has led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to indefinitely postpone plans to declare the bird extinct and remove it from the endangered species list. Let’s let conservation efforts and

the maturation of its grub-laden cypress, tupelos, and sweet gum trees encourage its recovery. And let's thank Pennsylvania-based Steve Latta and his team for advancing those conservation efforts for this magnificent icon of southeastern riverbottom forests. Visit www.aviary.org to learn more about bird conservation at Pittsburgh's National Aviary.

Photo credits:

1. Ivory-billed woodpecker, Plate 66 by John James Audubon, courtesy of the John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, Montgomery County Audubon Collection, and Zebra Publishing.
2. 1935 Photo of Ivory-billed woodpecker, Arthur A. Allen, Singer Tract, Louisiana, Public domain.
3. Pileated woodpecker, Natalie Massarotti, 2022 Audubon Photo Awards

