

## HAVE YOU SEEN ELVIS?

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The Darby Hills house where we started rearing our family back in Indiana sat in a wooded setting next to a creek, a short walk from the Ohio River. We young homeowners thought we lived in a woodland paradise. Creepy, crawly things regularly emerged from the creek bed below us but it was the bird life that provided the real thrills. In the spring, migrating flocks of evening grosbeaks regularly stopped over for an evening and we even had our own white robin, an albino aberrant whose annual visit to our front lawn was a show stopper for the whole neighborhood.

Early one misty spring day, as I walked out our long driveway to pick up the paper, I was startled by a strange flying creature swooping across my field of vision. I froze in my steps until its undulating flight took it out of sight. For sure, it wasn't one of the owls or hawks that made our neighborhood their happy hunting grounds. It was a bird I had never seen before and all I could think of at that moment was that I was observing something prehistoric.

Well, it didn't take long for my wife, a savvier birder, to set me straight. What I had seen was a little out of the ordinary but not all that uncommon for our area. I had caught a glimpse of a pileated woodpecker, the largest of the pecker family now inhabiting the Midwest. Nonetheless, those swooping wings, the wavy flight, that cocked head with the big red mustache presented a dramatic vision I could never forget.

My sense that I was seeing something prehistoric was an accurate enough intuition, I learned, because sixty millions years later the dinosaurs' direct ancestors are still with us – and we call them birds. Having caught that glimpse of my first pileated,

and having subsequently spotted others in the ensuing years, I have a better idea of how those strange pterodactyls must have looked.

As stunning as its appearance is, the pileated serves as but a foil, a fooler as one ascends the pecker ladder, for there is, or was, a bird of the same family more awe-inspiring in every respect. It is the *Campephilus principalis*, more popularly known as the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, by all accounts one of the most impressive creatures ever seen in the United States. From John James Audubon to Teddy Roosevelt, from ordinary backwoods folks to a knowledgeable cadre of present-day ornithologists, the sight of an ivorybill was, and is, enough to provoke awe and wonder, as in the exclamation, “Lord God! What a bird!” In fact, through much of the American South, that’s precisely what the creature is often called, the Lord God bird.

Even though the two-foot-long ivorybill is larger than the pileated, more colorful and striking in appearance with a 30-inch wingspan and royal white and black plumage, and more powerful in its ability to chop wood with its chiseled beak, the two species were, or are, frequently mistaken for each other, although technically they belong to a different genus. That confusion has helped to fuel a raging controversy over whether the Ivory-billed woodpecker has, in fact, grown extinct over the past half century. Science defines extinction as the death of all members of an entire species, their genetic strain forever extinguished. We are told that 99 per cent of all species that ever existed on earth are no longer around.

For example, we know for sure that the passenger pigeon is extinct because we have the remains of Martha, the last one, who died right here at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. Where once passenger pigeons made up one-quarter of all bird life in the U.S. and blackened the skies as white settlers arrived, they were wiped out in a matter of decades.

It has been an accepted bit of ornithological orthodoxy for some years now that that, too, has become the fate of the ivorybill. Yet a brave group of highly trained, completely credible professional bird experts contend they are absolutely, positively sure

they have seen the magnificent bird in the last half-dozen years – and they swear they weren't confusing it with the pileated version.

In its heyday, the ivorybill was peculiar to what we now know as the Old Confederacy, except for a few spotted in Cuba at one point. It lived in dense old-growth swampy forests in the southern regions, where oaks and hackberries and tupelos abounded, and where the bald cypress grew to as much as 10 feet in diameter, towering more than 100 feet. The bird was always a rare, elusive species, which – combined with its striking appearance – made it all the more prized as a decoration, a specimen or a succulent meal.

The first authority to identify the ivorybill, and then to describe and paint it, was Mark Catesby, the remarkable English naturalist who came to Virginia to visit his sister in the early 1700's. He immediately became fascinated with the flora and fauna along the southern seaboard. His fondest interest was birds and he painted 100 species he found in the new land. One of them was the ivorybill, which Catesby was able to watch awestruck as it scaled the bark from a tree and fed off the larvae embedded underneath. He called it “the Largest White-bill Woodpecker” and offered a somewhat primitive looking drawing of it on Plate 16 in the first volume of his monumental achievement, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*.

Even before the white settlers' arrival, the ivorybills' sharply chiseled beaks had become prized objects of trade among the native tribes of the South. Mark Catesby, for example, was intrigued to see Indian warriors proudly displaying headdresses and necklaces strung with these polished white bills. Indicative of their widespread popularity, burial mounds have been unearthed as far away as Colorado containing these greatly valued objects, a harbinger of the deadly harvest that would ultimately endanger the bird's very existence.

The dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought Alexander Wilson to America, a Scotsman who was destined to become known as the “father of ornithology” in the young United

States. Wilson was determined to catch and paint every bird species in the country, but since his trapping skills didn't match his marksmanship, he ended up shooting a lot of them. Such was his memorable encounter with ivorybills early in 1809. Riding horseback through the woods of North Carolina, he heard the unique sounds that signaled the presence of the bird and he was able to get near enough to blast one from high in a cypress tree. What followed nearly proved his undoing, as he himself recounted. His shot managed only to clip one wing of the woodpecker, so that the bird was moving on the ground when he reached it. Determined to snare the trophy, he leaned down from his saddle and as he picked it up, it "uttered a loudly reiterated and most piteous note, exactly resembling the violent crying of a young child, which terrified my horse so as to nearly cost me my life." Wilson's troubles were only starting, though, as it turned out.

He rode to an inn in the nearby town of Wilmington with the wounded prize tucked away in his coat because he had the zany idea of making it his pet. The racket it was making attracted curious stares. He rented a room and decided to leave the bird in it while he sought a stable to house his horse. When he returned less than an hour later, he found the room in shambles. Trying to escape, the bird had pecked a hole larger than a fist in the ceiling above the bed, spewing pieces of plaster across the floor. Faced with the need to leave the room again to hunt grubs for the bird to eat, Wilson decided this time to use a piece of string to tie the leg of his unwilling pet to a handsome table in the room. As he returned and was approaching the room, "I heard him once again hard at work, and on entering, had the mortification to perceive that he had almost entirely ruined the mahogany table to which he was fastened, and on which he had wreaked his whole vengeance." The poor bird expired three days later, a death Wilson said he witnessed "with regret."

Wilson's misadventures offered a rare eye-witness look at the pecker's powerful prowess. Where the ivorybill was found in remote parts of Cuba, it was known among the natives as *el carpintero royal*, the royal carpenter. Its ability to strip huge sections of bark from trees and to carve sizeable holes for nests in the hardwoods is unparalleled. Its bill is really not made of ivory – that refers only to the color -- but of bone deeply

embedded in the skull so as to absorb the shock of hammering. The bill ends in a delicately chiseled beak that acts as a giant razor in stripping away the bark to lay bare larvae, the main course of its diet.

John James Audubon's painting of the ivorybill in his famous *Birds of America* depicts three of the birds frantically at work stripping a tree limb. Critics consider it one of the best depictions of the species ever made. The ivorybill's striking appearance reminded Audubon of a Vandyke painting, comparing it to "some of the boldest and noblest productions of that inimitable artist's pencil." Audubon obtained the specimens for his vivid drawing while on a trip down the Mississippi River aboard a cargo flatboat in the autumn of 1820. The financially pinched wildlife artist had pushed off from Cincinnati on October 12th bound for the central Mississippi flyway where he hoped to collect and draw birds – and in the process earn badly needed funds.

It is difficult for us to imagine the richness of the primitive wilderness he encountered in the lands bordering the river and the incredible diversity of bird life that flourished there -- bald eagles, marsh hawks, peregrine falcons, cormorants, and great flocks of geese and ducks. Below the mouth of the Arkansas River, Audubon described finally finding the ivorybill in the "sultry pestiferous atmosphere" of black muddy water, his ears "assailed by the dismal croaking of innumerable frogs, the hissing of serpents, or the bellowing of alligators." Yet the "constant cry" of his ivorybill prey led him to the three which he bagged with his gun.

No wonder Audubon mentioned the ivorybill's distinctive cry. Those who have sought the woodpecker over the years usually report hearing it before catching a glimpse of its black and white plumage in flight. Its characteristic drum is a loud BAM-bam, the twin raps coming so close together that some mistake them for a single sound. This is followed by quite audible nasal toots, reminiscent of a child's toy horn: keeey-eeent, keeey-eeent, keeey-eeent. Such racket led some to call the ivorybill the "kent bird."

It wouldn't be many decades after Audubon's encounter, however, that the ivorybill started getting scarcer, a phenomenon we now understand as stemming from two main causes.

Hobbyists at every moment in human history seem to have been attracted to collecting things: coinage, art, pottery, bottles, match books, beer cans, what have you. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, man's fancy turned to collecting birds and feathers. Coincidentally, female fashion of the time favored plumage. As with all such fads, the rarer the specimen, the more valuable it was and the harder it was hunted. Such was the case with the ivorybill, whose beauty and rarity put a high price on its cocked head. It just wasn't the casual collector who invaded the dense swampy forests of the South to find these trophies. Experts in bird life, those we remember today as prominent ornithologists of their time, had insatiable appetites, all in the name of being able to study and draw their catch. William Brewster was the son of a Boston banker who used his family's wealth to build one of the world's great private museums of bird specimens and their eggs. There is a famous photograph of him from the 1890s with a string of ivorybills he shot on a collecting trip along the Suwannee River in Florida. Eventually he amassed the world's largest known ivorybill collection with 54 specimens. He was fussy about what he acquired, rejecting those with imperfections in their feathers or having cracks in their bills. He teamed with an artist and a fellow fancier, Arthur Wayne, and arranged to buy birds from local hunters, paying up to \$25 for a single skin. Wayne himself killed 44. It is claimed that their collective gluttony made the ivorybill extinct along several waterways of Florida. But they were not alone in their primal urge to shoot every one of the species they could track down. Cajuns thought they made a tasty meal.

An even greater factor in the demise of the bird was the disappearance over time of the great lowland forests where the ivorybill was able to thrive. The Civil War had ravaged the South's economy while in the North the industrial revolution was creating an unprecedented demand for lumber. Once Southern landowners regained legal possession of their land in the 1870s, they found a ready market for their timber. The ensuing lumber boom, which stretched over the next half century, resembled the California gold

rush. Land was cheap. The state of Florida sold 4 million acres to a Philadelphia company for 25 cents an acre. A British company bought a million Louisiana acres for 12 ½ cents an acre. All that was needed was rail transport to bring the rich supply of hardwoods to market. The Illinois Central – the old IC – built the first line from Mississippi to Chicago, which was suffering from the ravages of the city’s great fire of 1871 and needing huge quantities of lumber. Many other north-south rail lines followed. Labor, too, was easy to find with both white and black workers willing to put in a day’s timbering for as little as 50 cents. Using cross-cut saws, they went to work with devastating effect. Their efforts were soon followed by machines able to make quicker and more effective work of the dense forests. Year by year, stretching to the World War II era, the vast southern bottomland hardwood forests gradually disappeared.

A vicious cycle set in. As their habitat receded, ivorybills became easier to spot. As they became rarer, they became more valuable. Thus, their population dwindled. By 1885, no ivorybills could be found in either North or South Carolina. By the turn of the century, the species was believed restricted to the Gulf states and the lower Mississippi valley.

Faced with a shrinking habitat and disappearing food supply, the plight of the ivorybill stood as a marker in a larger conservation struggle. What could be done to protect the flora and fauna of a young America as it raced ahead to meet the demands of the modern technological age?

While the overall prospects for the woodpecker were growing bleak, they were still being spotted in a few well-known habitats. In 1907, for example, Teddy Roosevelt went rough-riding through the Tensas River swamp in northeastern Louisiana in the hunt for bears “after the fashion of the old Southern planters.” That meant riding horseback through the thick forests and using dogs to track down the bears, one of which he managed to kill. What really caught TR’s eye, though, were the three ivorybills he sighted during the hunt, saying these “most notable birds . . . set off the wildness of the swamp as much as any of the beasts of the chase.”

As the ivorybill woodpecker's appearance grew less common in the early and middle decades of the 1900s, those who claimed sightings met with growing skepticism from professional birders, who took it as an article of faith that the bird was becoming extinct. Some of these claims were easily dismissed, because often it was simply someone confusing a pileated for an ivorybill. Others, it turned out, were downright fraudulent, the work of opportunists who hoped to cash in on the fame and fortune awaiting the one credited with rediscovering the bird. However, a few sightings were more convincing and not so readily rejected.

Mason D. Spencer was a larger-than-life country lawyer and state legislator from Tallulah, Louisiana who owned a hunting camp along the same Tensas River that Teddy Roosevelt had hunted. Spencer was attending a meeting of wildlife officials in 1932 when someone joked that the moonshine in Spencer's neighborhood must be plentiful because a game warden claimed ivorybills were being sighted in the wilds along the river. It was no joke, Spencer told the state officials, and if the conservation folks would issue him a permit to shoot a specimen, he would prove them wrong. Apparently to call his bluff, a permit was issued. Within a few days Spencer strolled into a state wildlife official's office with a freshly shot male ivorybill.

It was three years later that Cornell University joined the American Museum of Natural History in launching a scientific expedition to take motion pictures and sound recordings of vanishing bird species in America. Ivorybills were on their list. Having heard about Spencer's exploit, the researchers decided that one of their prime targets would be the Tensas River area -- the so-called Singer Tract, an 81,000-acre site which had been acquired two decades earlier by the Singer Sewing Machine Company. The Tensas is a meandering backwater tributary of the Mississippi and in it great, dense stands of trees grew in the barely accessible, rich delta silt not far from Vicksburg. Singer had needed oak trees for the beautiful sewing machine cabinets prized by women customers the world over and the Tensas River bottoms provided a bountiful supply.

The Cornell team quickly confirmed Mason Spencer's story. In five days, they observed ivorybills in flight, stripping bark from trees and peeking out of their nests. They were able to capture the birds in "stiff and jerky" motion pictures, a remarkable feat considering "talkies" were such a new technology.

One of the members of the Cornell team was a graduate student by the name of James Tanner. He grew so entranced with his subject that he returned to the Singer Tract in 1937 and spent two lonely years there, observing and compiling data about ivorybills for his Ph. D. dissertation. He even managed to snare one for banding, naming it Sonny Boy. Much of what is now known about the ivory-billed woodpecker is based largely on the meticulous research conducted at the Singer Tract, especially by the legendary Tanner.

Despite its priceless value to the world of ornithology, the Singer Tract was turning into its own tragic conservation story. Dr. Tanner's pathfinding research stirred efforts to preserve the woodpeckers' habitat. In response, the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company, which had acquired timber rights for the area from Singer, speeded up its logging. Appeals went all the way to Franklin Delano Roosevelt to create a national park out of the tract but World War II was dawning and Chicago Mill and Lumber could sell all the wood it could cut. It went to make ammo boxes and other wartime material. So the appeals to stop fell on deaf ears. Congress refused to get involved. Eventually German POWs were brought to the site and with their customary efficiency they felled many of the remaining giant trees in uncut stands. In 1944, Don Eckelberry, a National Audubon Society artist, went to the site to see whether any ivorybills still lived amid the devastation of what some considered the nation's last ivorybill forest. He spent two weeks searching, finally found a lone female pecking at felled logs, and photographed her. That photo is the last universally accepted sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker in the United States. Today the Singer Tract is leveed and planted in soybeans, largely denuded of trees.

In the post-war years that followed, the cry of the kent bird was rarely heard in the land. A few reports trickled in to ornithologists from time to time about suspected sightings but these were mostly ignored or dismissed. It wasn't known until 30 years later that during this period well-qualified observers in Texas, Florida and Georgia also thought they had seen or heard the elusive bird but they preferred to keep quiet for fear of attracting peer ridicule.

It was not until April 1, 1999 that the search for the ivorybill once again attracted much public attention. David Kulivan, a Louisiana State University forestry student, was out hunting wild turkeys in the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area near Baton Rouge, a vast, densely wooded swampland that for years had been the source of stories and rumors about ivorybills. Early in the morning he saw two woodpeckers fly hardly 15 yards in front of his camouflaged hideout. He watched them at work for a full 10 minutes and grew convinced they were ivorybills. However, out of worry that he would not be believed, he waited two weeks before reporting his experience to LSU biologists. Once his professors heard him describe in minute detail what he had seen, though, they did believe him. They in turn convinced state officials to quietly suspend logging in the area while an intensive search for more evidence could be made. But word of the sighting finally leaked out and the woods were soon overrun with hordes of birders hoping to catch a glimpse. No additional evidence surfaced thereafter.

Five more years passed before another tantalizing clue surfaced in the tangled ivorybill mystery. This time the whole world would hear about it and Cincinnati's most prominent bird expert would become involved.

The White River National Wildlife Refuge is one of the largest bottomland hardwood forests remaining in the Mississippi River drainage area, covering some 160,000 acres southwest of Memphis. A part of it is located in an area along the Cache River basin known as Bayou de View. It offered such an attractive potential habitat for ivorybills that a motley crew of three savvy birders spent the early months of 2004 combing this Arkansas backwater. Their search is meticulously recounted by Tim

Gallagher, one of the searchers, in his book, *The Grail Bird*. On February 27<sup>th</sup>, at 1:30 p.m., Gallagher and his pals saw a large black-and-white bird flying toward them from 80 feet away. They thought it was an ivorybill but weren't 100% sure. They were certain it wasn't a pileated. Gallagher was based at Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology, so he quickly informed his boss, John Fitzpatrick, about their experience. Fitzpatrick authorized a full-scale research team equipped with the latest video and sound technology. On April 25<sup>th</sup>, two team members reported that "a large black-and-white woodpecker burst from the other side of a tupelo . . . and flew straight away" from them. A camcorder in the front of their kayak was running and captured a rear-end look at the bird in flight. The team acquired additional sightings and other telltale evidence through September. They were torn about what to do next. "If you make the sightings known," they were warned, "you doom the bird." Not mentioned was the parallel risk of dooming one's professional reputation, so pervasive was the belief that the ivorybill species was extinct, a belief adhered to as dogmatically as the tenets of the most fundamentalist sect.

Eventually, however, the interest that was being generated became so intense that word of the Cornell discoveries reached the Secretary of Interior in Washington. Thus it was that in January 2005, John Ruthven received a call from a White House official, John Bridgeland of Cincinnati, inviting him to join a top-secret meeting in the office of the Interior secretary, Gail Norton.

John Ruthven has spent his life studying, sighting, hunting and painting birds, a life that has earned him much deserved acclaim, including the National Medal of Arts. His work has been compared to Audubon's. Of the 700 species of birds that call the continental United States their home, John estimates he has seen and identified about 300 of them. He has logged another 300 identifications on international trips, especially in South America and Africa. He especially prizes his work on three African trips, which included a harrowing escape from a remote junction blocked by renegade soldiers in Kenya and a police-assisted nighttime shooting of a prize bird specimen from a rooftop in downtown Nairobi.

Now he was opening a new chapter in his distinguished career, one that promised to consume him just as it had so many others over the past two centuries. He was to join 15 bird authorities invited by Secretary Norton to discuss the Arkansas discovery of the ivorybill and the further steps needed to protect the endangered species. The invitees were sworn to secrecy and asked to sign affidavits pledging complete confidentiality. It was decided that John's role was to do a painting of the bird, commissioned by Cornell, for unveiling at a Washington press conference in early summer where news of the ivorybill would be released. So he had to work fast. Just how fast became apparent when he was later told, in a frantic call, that the schedule was being moved up by a full month because word was leaking out. He labored non-stop, using as his models the skins of five 100-year-old specimens housed in Cincinnati's Natural History Museum collection. He managed to complete the painting at the very 11<sup>th</sup> hour, then had to enlist emergency help from friends at Fed Ex so that the framed work could be delivered to the Secretary's office only hours before the press conference.

With John Ruthven's painting forming part of the backdrop, and with John himself in prominent attendance, Secretary Norton announced to a startled world that the bird written off as extinct had been found, photographed and recorded in eastern Arkansas over the previous year. The news made headlines around the world. The very fact that something once thought gone forever had reappeared thrilled even those who wouldn't know a starling from a grackle.

No sooner had the news broken, though, when doubting Thomases from the scientific community started questioning the credibility of the Cornell work. After close examination, they argued, the video purporting to show an ivorybill in flight was too fuzzy to qualify as believable evidence. Pure science demanded better proof, they said. A rancorous dispute broke out in the ranks of the professionals of the bird world with celebrated names on both sides of the debate. Some went so far as to dismiss the work of the Cornell team as "faith-based ornithology." The belief that the ivorybill woodpecker was extinct had become so embedded in the canons of ornithology over the past half century that it would not admit the slightest exception without overwhelming evidence to

the contrary. Those who had a contrary view were sometimes likened to believers in Bigfoot or the Loch Ness monster, even those with proper credentials who were convinced they saw the bird with their own eyes.

Was seeing really believing, or not? Could what was seen have been instead some genetically aberrant bird that only resembled the ivorybill, reminiscent of our own white robin of Darby Hills? Could the supposedly distinctive “kent” call have been instead a mocking bird doing what mockers do best? Or even if the bird sighted was indeed an ivorybill, could it not just be but a remnant unable to continue the species?

Resistance from the hierarchy did not deter those who nonetheless held out hope of proving the ivorybill’s existence. An expensive research project, coordinated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, was mounted over the Cache River area and adjoining territory to find the evidence that was being demanded. Even helicopters were employed in the hunt in hope of spotting ivorybills in flight over the dense swamplands. John Ruthven joined Tim Gallagher, John Bridgeland and a who’s who from the birding world on two such expeditions in Arkansas in the following year. Ruthven was honored to have been chosen to paint the bird, but he was mostly yearning now to see one up close and personal, even if it meant tough slogging through the dense woods. “If I see something that looks like a skunk up a tree, I’ll know I’ve seen an ivorybill,” he explained. Despite the massive search of which he was part and all the international attention it garnered, nothing further was turned up in the rugged Arkansas bottoms that would persuade the keepers of the rubrics. The empty results only strengthened their position. They pointed out that the fact that such an elaborate search produced no evidence was telling proof in itself that the ivorybill is indeed no longer to be found.

Along the way, John began hearing of a more discreet endeavor unfolding in the Florida panhandle. Geoffrey Hill, a biology professor from Auburn University and an authority on bird plumage, was reported to have found proof that an ivorybill population still lived along the meandering Choctawhatchee River. He was keeping it quiet but invited the two Johns – Ruthven and Bridgeland – to kayak their way into the 60-square-

mile area infested with alligators, mosquitoes and cottonmouths. It is a desolate, poverty-stricken place. Local hunters go there hoping to bag deer and wild boar. Looking for the bird in these challenging surroundings was no child's play. To preserve the secrecy of their enterprise, it was agreed that any communication would be couched in a coded question, "Have you seen Elvis?" Geoff Hill, for one, was convinced that he had indeed seen Elvis. He and his team from Auburn reported detecting ivorybills virtually every week they entered the woods during a six-month period in 2005-06. They also found 20 entrance holes in trees suggesting ivorybill nesting territory. They found numerous trees with bark stripped off in the manner of the ivorybill and considered it the best feeding area yet uncovered. They recorded 150 separate sounds of double-BAM knocks and kent calls. But they had been unable to capture on film or digital image any bird in flight.

John Ruthven endorses Geoff Hill's belief that a population survives in this remote area and represents the best case for ivorybills still existing in the United States. John is preparing to make his fourth expedition into the Choctawhatchee basin and his conviction grows. He's been willing to sit without moving for six hours, to paddle his kayak through infested waters pocked with stumps and tangled trees, and to break through ice on a freezing January morning in this effort to claim the ultimate in ornithological prizes – proving the ivorybill lives. Although he has seen the telltale signs of stripped bark and nesting holes, he has yet to see or hear the bird itself.

However, on one of his trips, a Cincinnati companion, John Agnew, also a wildlife artist, heard a commotion at the headwaters of Bruce Creek, a tributary of the Choctawhatchee, and readied his camera. With that, a large bird sped into view in level flight. Agnew, who went to Florida not believing ivorybills were still around, was so transfixed, he had to look with his bare eyes and the bird was gone before he could get his camera aimed. He thinks he saw an ivorybill because, unlike the pileated woodpecker with its characteristic undulating flight pattern, this one flew straight like a wood duck. Once again, though, there was no confirming proof, only more tantalizing hints.

Along with Geoff Hill, John thinks there's a good possibility that ivorybills have adapted sufficiently to remain along several river basins in the Florida panhandle and that if this proves so, one can grow more optimistic about the future of the species. In Professor Hill's words, "The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is not extinct. It isn't even hanging by a thread. It has a solid toehold in the forests on the Florida Panhandle. My sincerest hope is that as a society we now do what we must to make sure this population expands to fill at least a portion of its former range. In an age of strip malls and 7-minute traffic lights, iPods and Islamic Jihads, more than ever we need deep, impenetrable swamps presided over by the Lord God of birds."

On John Ruthven's trips in his continuing search through the flooded Florida wilderness, he stays in a little town named Ponce de Leon. It's appropriate, for at a robust 84, John is discovering his own fountain of youth in the process. Leaning forward from his chair in his historic Georgetown studio in Brown County, his face glows as he speaks of eventually seeing and photographing the elusive woodpecker. He dreams aloud: "Wouldn't that be a crowning glory?"

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