Sounds of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker (1935)

Added to the National Registry: 2008
Essay by Cary O'Dell

The ivory-billed woodpecker

The avian species *Campephilus principalis* is better known as the ivory-billed woodpecker. It may or may not be extinct.

At its full maturity, the ivory-billed woodpecker is the largest woodpecker indigenous to the United States and the third-largest woodpecker in the world. A fully-grown ivory-billed usually measures up to 20 inches in length and possesses an impressive wingspan of about three feet. Its body is a striking mix of black and white feathers with some physical gender-specific differences also categorizing the birds. According to the Nature Conservatory, males have a prominent scarlet crest (jutting plumage arising from its head), while the female's crest is black. The bird gets its name from its distinctive long, white bill which continues to grow throughout its life. At one time, the bills of the birds were highly prized by collectors and may also have been used as money by some Native American tribes.

The normal life-expectancy for the ivory-billed woodpecker is 30 years. They thrive in bottomland forest areas and swamps with large hardwoods. They nest in trees that they burrow out by woodpecking. The bird's primary diet consists of insects, fruits, nuts and, primarily, beetle larvae extracted from trees with the bird's extended beak. It is the mass extermination of these trees which has driven the ivory-billed woodpecker to its own extinction or near extinction.

Once the most dominate type of woodpecker in North America, the population of the ivory-billed woodpecker, which was centered mainly in the American south (Florida, Arkansas, etc.), was completely devastated by the 1920s due to deforestation and hunting. By 1938, it is believed only 20 individual birds remained throughout the world. Due to their low numbers, the remaining birds were often difficult to track.

As the years passed without a single sighting of the large, colorful creature, many scientists and environmentalists began to speculate that--like the great dinosaurs of yore--the last of the ivory-billeds had long since expired. However, without certifiable proof, and hundreds of acres of dense forest still possibly hospitable to the species, many of the curious still annually take to the ground in search of the all-elusive bird. Today, not nearly a year goes by that someone (amateur bird watcher or university-sanctioned research team) does not emerge with a fuzzy photo, video and/or an eye witness account documenting the sighting of a lone ivory-billed. Such revelations are met with the same excitement and intense scrutiny usually reserved for Bigfoot or UFO encounters.

In 2005, evidence emerged of a legitimate sighting, one worthy enough to gain the support of the Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology and the US Department of the Interior. This

supposed rediscovery of a once-considered dead species was a major news story even in the mainstream press. However, despite the esteemed opinions involved, others in the bird community questioned the 2005 finding—not that it was necessarily real, only if it was truly the North American ivory-billed. The ivory-billed's close resemblance to other bird species has only fueled the controversy over the authenticity of almost all findings.

This alleged rediscovery (usually called the Luneau Discovery or Video, named after its finder) has not slowed down interest in finding undeniable proof of the ivory-bill's continued existence. Teams are still being dispatched, books and articles are still being published, and Youtube currently contains several videos of birds purporting to be the long-lost, seldom-seen ivory-billed.

In any event, the last fully authenticated, accepted sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker occurred in 1935 in the Singer Tract area of Louisiana. It was discovered by a special bird-tracking team headed up by ornithologist Arthur Allen, founder of the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University. He and his colleagues decamped for the Pelican State in '35 after they received news of a small ivory-billed population in the area. His team consisted of faculty colleague George Sutton, grad student James Tanner and sound technician Paul Kellog. They took with them on their quest an impressive array of then state-of-the-art tracking equipment including a motion picture camera.

After arriving at the Tract, the team unloaded their equipment from their van and onto wagons for their deep journey into the wetlands. Their exploration proceeded well and was, ultimately, successful. Later, team member Sutton would recall, "The whole experience was like a dream. There we sat in the wild swamp, miles and miles from any highway, with two ivory-billed woodpeckers so close to us that we could see their eyes, their long toes, even their slightly curved claws with our binoculars."

The movie camera they brought with them proved especially fortunate and prophetic as the team was able to successfully capture the first (and some say last) motion and sound recordings of the ivory-billed woodpecker and its various calls. (Straight sound recorders were not practical at that time; hence this ivory-billed's sounds were first committed to film stock.) The bird's nasal-y, tooting call, or "kent," was fully registered and recorded. Today, to the untrained ear it sounds very much like a child's squeak toy; to bird experts, however, it's the holy grail.

But these historic 1935 sound recordings brought with them more than just an impressive batch of bragger's rights. Long-time Cornell lab director Dr. John Fitzpatrick has said of the tapes, "The superb recordings of the ivory-billed woodpecker made by Arthur Allen and co-workers in 1935 might be the most famous natural sound recordings ever made."

Since then, it is consistently back to these now nearly century old sounds that experts still turn to compare newer recordings to determine if the elusive ivory-billed woodpecker has, indeed, returned from "extinction." These recordings have also been imperative in taking bird call recognition to the next, new high tech level. The Allen recordings have served as the base line for specialty-designed computer programs created to discern--hopefully above and beyond the capabilities of the human ear--real ivory-billed woodpecker calls from mere soundalikes or forgeries. The Allen recordings have also been used in the wild, as a means to hopefully attract other ivory-billed woodpeckers.

But perhaps most importantly, these recordings exist simply as history for the sake of history, an aural record of a potentially permanently vanished piece of the American wilderness.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).