

# **Ivory-billed woodpecker**

## **Questions and Answers for the 2006-2007 search season**

**December 21, 2006**

**Q: Why are searches for the Ivory-billed woodpecker important?**

**A:** In February 2004, Gene Sparling, a kayaker, observed and described an Ivory-billed Woodpecker from the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas. Two weeks later, and based on this initial sighting, two experienced individuals, Tim Gallagher and Bobby Harrison, also observed and described an Ivory-billed Woodpecker at the same location. Prior to these credible sightings, the species had been thought extinct in the United States for the past 60 years. The last previously well-documented sightings of this bird, once called the "great chieftain of the woodpecker tribe" by John James Audubon, was in northeast Louisiana during the mid-1930s to mid-1940s. Despite the lack of thorough documentation after the 1940s, there has been a continuous flow of reports, some more credible than others, from the 1950s through the 1990s from across the Southeast, but few of these reports involved multiple observations by experienced observers at the same general location. From the bird that Sparling originally observed in February 2004 has sprung the most intensive search effort for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in history, both within the "Corridor of Hope" or the Big Woods, an area in eastern Arkansas about 120 miles long and up to 20 miles wide, as well as throughout the historical range of this species.

**Q: What other documentation is there to prove the Ivory-billed woodpecker still exists?**

**A:** Proof with respect to bird identification is defined as evidence leading to a conclusion that is repeatedly interpreted the same way by independent observers. Proof to firmly establish that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker persists today has been elusive during the past 60 years. Photos of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker from Louisiana, sound recordings from Texas, and even a feather from Florida, all from the 1960s and 1970s, are highly suggestive forms of evidence. However, individually these pieces of evidence are not considered conclusive to prove the species persisted after the 1940s. In other words, not all alternative explanations for this evidence have been eliminated from consideration.

With respect to the initial Arkansas observations from February 2004, the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and The Nature Conservancy of Arkansas, working with appropriate State and Federal conservation agencies, initiated an organized search of the Big Woods that concluded in late April 2005. This search team understood that nothing short of diagnostic photographs, video, fresh feathers or egg fragments would constitute evidence that independent observers could agree on as conclusive. With this standard established, the Big Woods search resulted in at least seven credible sightings of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, and most importantly a brief video filmed by David Luneau from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. After extensive analysis, the bird in the video was determined to be an Ivory-billed Woodpecker and not the more common Pileated Woodpecker. Although this video clearly shows a large woodpecker with extensive white in the wings (much more than would appear typical of pileated woodpeckers), the analysis and conclusions reached by the search team are dependent upon a number of indirect lines of evidence. This indirect analysis, though typical of scientific inquiry, has been subjected to extensive scrutiny by those who propose alternative explanations.

There is at this time one published critique of the Luneau video, with the explanation presented that the bird in the video is more likely a normal pileated woodpecker. This alternative view is based primarily on differing interpretations of video artifacts and bird flight mechanics. The Service and its conservation partners consider most persuasive, among a number of reasons, the failure of all known videos showing pileated woodpeckers in flight to even come close to matching the characteristics present on the bird in the Luneau video in rejecting this alternative explanation. The Service and its conservation partners understand that all the existing evidence at this time does not constitute proof beyond all doubt to all independent observers that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers persist within the Big Woods. However, all Federal and State conservation agencies with responsibility for this species accept the evidence as substantial in support of its persistence and continue to take into account the biological and habitat requirements of this species in making all management decisions. So while the debate of the Luneau video is understood as an integral part of the scientific process and is expected to continue, the long-term objective of reliably relocating Ivory-billed Woodpeckers and promoting conservation of this species also continues.

**Q: Where have there been searches since the April 2005 announcement?**

**A:** Led by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and Audubon Arkansas, the 2005-2006 search season focused on the Big Woods area in eastern Arkansas. Twenty-two full-time searchers, armed with state-of the art audio and video monitoring devices, combed a 550,000-acre area including the Cache River and White River National Wildlife Refuges, Dagmar Wildlife Management Area, and other properties. The searchers were aided by volunteers who spent two weeks at a time searching the vast forest. Scientists from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and researchers from several state and federal agencies have reviewed all the evidence that was gathered during the last winter's search season, including potential sightings, thousands of hours of audio recordings, and examinations of tree cavities, and bark scalings. Although the search resulted in no better documentation beyond previous searches, four potential sightings were each documented with a single field mark, and additional acoustic evidence was gathered from both the Cache River and White River National Wildlife Refuges. Although this suggests that one or more Ivory-billed Woodpeckers continue to be present in the Big Woods, the inability to reliably relocate Ivory-billed Woodpecker casts doubt on whether there are breeding pairs in the Big Woods at this time.

In addition to Arkansas, state-led searches were conducted during the winter of 2005-2006 in South Carolina primarily at Congaree National Park, in Georgia at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, and along the Louisiana-Mississippi border using ultralight aircraft over the Pearl River. Several other searches were undertaken based on recent potential encounters with Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in other states within the historical range of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Again, no conclusive evidence has emerged from these efforts, but information has been gathered that will be used to guide further searches in these States (see below).

The most publicized search independent from state-led efforts was announced recently by Dr. Geoff Hill, a noted Auburn University professor and ornithologist, and Dr. Daniel Mennill, a sound analysis expert and professor from the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. They and their team made public the results so far of their year-long search in the Florida panhandle in an article published in the online journal Avian Conservation and Ecology. Their article can be found at <http://www.ace-eco.org>. Two Florida natural resource agencies and the federal agency overseeing the [Ivory-billed Woodpecker](#)'s recovery effort expressed interest in the latest results of work to find the elusive woodpecker in the Florida panhandle. At the same time, while the agencies indicated the evidence to date is promising, they said the bird's presence is not yet confirmed there.

**Q: What is planned for the 2006-2007 search season?**

**A:** Organized state-led searches are presently being supported in Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas. Support for searches in other States is presently under consideration. Search efforts will resume in eastern Arkansas in January 2007 and continue through April 21. Researchers will focus on the unsearched areas of the Big Woods with good Ivory-billed Woodpecker habitat.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology will continue to assist the states with their search efforts. Cornell is expected to support many of these efforts with advice, equipment and personnel support, depending on the particular project. In August 2006, sixty representatives from natural resource organizations, universities, and state and federal agencies convened in Congaree National Park near Columbia, South Carolina, to plan and provide recommendations for future state-led searches. Attendees also shared search techniques, demonstrated equipment, and discussed ways to unify and standardize the search effort across the Southeast.

Texas initiated their search in November, while Alabama will join in with the search efforts in the Florida panhandle, in addition to most of the states that participated last year. Specific funding support from the Service and other conservation partners has been utilized in several searches. Future funding decisions will be based upon discussion and review by the steering and executive committees for the Ivory-billed woodpecker recovery team. Criteria to consider would be the woodpecker's historic range, habitat conditions, historic sightings, and recent sightings.

**Q: What if the 2006/2007 search season still yields no conclusive evidence?**

**A:** The Service still deems it imperative to continue with searches until conclusive evidence is gathered. Enough credible information has surfaced that leads our agency to believe that isolated populations of the species may still exist. It is our responsibility to ensure that we are making the appropriate decisions with regard to habitat management.

**Q: How does someone volunteer to be part of an organized search effort?**

**A:** Contact your state's ornithological society or wildlife agency. Searches are being planned and conducted in most states within the Ivory-bill's historic range, including Texas, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana.

**Q: What does an Ivory-billed woodpecker look like and where could it be found?**

**A:** Weighing about 16 to slightly over 20 ounces, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker has a jet black body with large white patches on its wings. Its impressive wingspan is about 30 inches. When the bird's wings are folded, it appears that there is a large "shield" of white on its lower back. Males and females look similar, except the male has red at the back of the crest and the female has black. In both sexes, a white stripe extends from below each yellow-colored eye, down the sides of the neck and onto the sides of each bird's back. The Ivory-billed woodpecker has a thick bill. Its identifying call is a nasal tooting "kent." Its drum is a quick double knock.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker historically inhabited mature bottomland hardwood forests and cypress swamps, with large hardwoods, often mixed with mature pines, in the surrounding uplands. It searches for recently dead, standing trees and strips the bark off them with its bill to feast on beetle larvae.

Since it looks very similar to the more common pileated woodpecker, please refer to the comparisons at <http://www.fws.gov/ivorybill/seenone.html> before reporting a sighting.

**Q: How does someone report an Ivory-billed Woodpecker sighting?**

**A:** People who think they have seen an Ivory-billed Woodpecker should fill out the online form available at [http://www.birds.cornell.edu/ivory/identifying/step4/document\\_view](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/ivory/identifying/step4/document_view) and send it to [ivorybill@cornell.edu](mailto:ivorybill@cornell.edu). Those without Internet access may request the form by calling the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at 1-800-843-2473.