

The ornithological community was electrified last spring by the announcement that researchers had confirmed the existence of at least one Ivory-billed Woodpecker in eastern Arkansas. This species, which had last been documented in the mid 1940s in the ill-fated Singer Tract in Louisiana, had become perhaps the most poignant symbol of Americana lost. It was widely assumed to have slipped into extinction in continental North America. A tiny population had persisted in Cuba a little longer, but even that spark had also flickered out by the mid 1980s. Although die-hards continued to collect anecdotal accounts of claimed sightings, and a few search efforts were mounted in various places across the South, no evidence that this magnificent species still clings to existence were forthcoming.

All that changed on April 28th of this year. A task force of searchers, led by personnel of Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology, and officials from the Department of the Interior, announced to the world that Ivory-billed Woodpecker had managed to cling to existence for more than half a century after it was thought to have become extinct. Within minutes ornithologists and birders everywhere were talking of little else. The entire story, however, was somewhat sobering. Despite the continued presence of numerous searchers in the field using a host of innovative tools for detection and documentation, the bird(s) remained extremely elusive and the physical documentation necessary to substantiate the discovery was painfully tiny.

Within hours of the announcement I had knocked out a draft proposal to canvass the most promising remaining habitat in southeastern Texas. The species had once been widespread across the eastern third of Texas. Indeed, as late as 1904 Vernon Bailey had collected two males from two different family groups several miles apart in the vicinity of Tarkington Prairie in northern Liberty County. Clearly the species was not exceptionally rare in southeast Texas in the early 20th century. John V. Dennis, an Ivory-bill researcher who had documented the continued existence of the species in Cuba by photograph in 1948, visited the "Big Thicket" area several times through the 1960s. His report of seeing a male bird in the area in 1966 was met with skepticism and even ridicule. He presented a tape recording he had made of an unseen Ivory-bill along Village Creek in Hardin County, on February 25th, 1968, to Cornell University where it lay unknown to present personnel at the Lab until recently. It was analyzed after the recent rediscovery and pronounced genuine. Southeast Texas had the most recent documented evidence of the continued existence of the symbol of the great southern bottomland forests before the recent discovery.

The official Ivory-billed Woodpecker Recovery Team put together by the Department of the Interior has reviewed our draft proposal and reported on it favorably. Actual funding for the project however remains elusive, like the bird itself. The three river corridors to be searched – the Trinity, Neches, and Sabine Rivers and their major tributaries downstream of the first major dams on each – are vast and difficult of access by land. Therefore, an important part of the proposed methodology involves extensive aerial searching both for the birds themselves (which are assumed to be conspicuous in flight from a low-flying aircraft after the fall leaf drop) and for the priority habitat areas to be searched by teams on the ground. The plan calls for an extensive network of partnerships with all the

stakeholders in this endeavor and they are many and include a number of federal and state, and local governmental agencies, non government research, land preservation and conservation groups, and private industry and individual land owners.

As the Secretary of the Interior said at the announcement of the rediscovery, it is not often that we are given a second chance to save a lost species. The discovery of the Singer Tract population came after another lengthy period of presumed extinction, and the opportunity it represented was lost through inaction. We must make every effort to find and protect this vanishing species while we have that precious second chance.