

The Ivory-bill Chronicles, Chapter 5
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The prime search season in the Big Thicket area is now upon us, and the next three months will be very busy ones. The deciduous trees along the Neches and Trinity Rivers are about as bare as they get all year, so visibility in the bottoms is as good as it gets. Since the Texas search is part of a larger, multi-state effort we had to modify our methodology somewhat to comply with the standardization of the search set forth by the US Fish & Wildlife Service. It was decided that searches should be conducted in a manner following a Habitat Occupancy Model developed by ecologists at the University of Georgia. This model requires that the search areas be divided into 2km² “patches” (roughly 500 acres) and that a random sample of these patches be visited at least three times for searches of at least 4 hours duration. The process of establishing the patches is tedious and time-consuming. Beth Wright, the search team leader, has taken this task nearly to completion which required teaching herself to use a complex computer program.

I knew that conditions on the ground in the search areas were going to be difficult due to the tremendous amount of Hurricane Rita-downed canopy trees (75% along the Neches). In fact conditions are even more difficult than I imagined. In the single growing season that has passed since the storm an amazing amount of early secondary successional vegetation (especially vines, and seemingly especially those vines that have thorns) has begun to choke the canopy gaps. This natural process will proceed for decades and will eventually fill in the large gaps in the forest with a dense growth of young trees, brush, and vines, vastly changing their nature for a very long time. What that means in terms of bird populations is that species requiring dense brush like White-eyed Vireos will be greatly increased at the expense of canopy species like Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos. In that sense it is a lucky thing that we are searching now rather than five years from now when the secondary vegetation will be even more impenetrable than it is already. Nevertheless we are forced to take the path of least resistance making a really systematic search impossible.

The meandering nature of the searches required by the realities of the terrain means that getting lost is even a greater danger than it would be under normal conditions. The crew has developed expert navigation skills using GPS and compass, an absolute requirement for anyone entering these almost completely road-less, trail-less areas. Coupled with the ongoing hunting season (forget camouflage; we have to wear brilliant “hunter orange” vests) there is a certain amount (hopefully small) of physical danger involved in this often exhausting work. The good news is that the mosquitoes (thick when we started the season in early November) succumbed to the first frost. Nor have snakes, poisonous or otherwise, been seen during searches.

And then there's the climate. While much of the rest of the state has withered under severe drought, the southeastern corner has enjoyed abundant rainfall since midsummer. High water in the Neches River and its associated system of innumerable sloughs, lakes, and bayous is a good news-bad news situation. Areas that were accessible on foot with rubber boots now require chest waders, and areas that required chest waders are only accessible by boat. On the other hand some streams with excessive amounts of portaging required during low flow periods are now navigable as long as they are not actually in flood.

We are receiving on loan from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology one of their Autonomous Recording Units (ARU) and a couple of time-lapse video cameras that can be programmed to take one still frame at whatever interval is desired. The ARU will be deployed in an area that has been identified as some of the best old growth forest. It will record whatever sounds are made within a certain radius for a period of two weeks. At the end of that time it must be shipped back to Cornell for analysis of the recordings. Unfortunately this analysis is quite expensive so we are very limited in how much use we can make of this technology. The cameras will be set up on interesting looking woodpecker cavities or bark foraging signs. With limited manpower we cannot "stake out" these kinds of possible woodpecker signs so the cameras will enable us to monitor these sites while searchers work elsewhere.

The Chronicles are to be continued.....