



ScienceWatch – Another Elvis Sighting? – Even Better!

The ivory-billed woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*), believed by many to have gone the way of the passenger pigeon, has miraculously been resurrected. According to a report published in the April 28, 2005 issue of *Science* the woodpecker is alive, but whether or not it is well is open to conjecture. The report by no less than 17 authors and headed by John Fitzpatrick of the Cornell Laboratory of ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, describes seven sightings by expert birders of an ivory-billed male along the bayous of Arkansas' White River, including a four-second video.

The bird, on the verge of being declared extinct, was last officially sighted in 1944 in a stand of old-growth bottomland forest in Louisiana. Despite pleas to protect both trees and woodpeckers, the forest was logged and a lone female was last seen among the stumps. Since then, like Elvis, the woodpecker has been "sighted" many times, but each sighting turned out to be a false alarm. However, on February 11, 2004, while kayaking the bayous in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, amateur naturalist Gene Sparling spotted a large red-crested woodpecker that landed on a tree about 20 meters (60 feet) in front of him. To Sparling's astonishment this woodpecker had white on the lower half of its folded wings and a white bill. He didn't believe what he saw until he went home and checked a field guide, which clearly showed that this bird was an ivory-billed woodpecker and not a pileated (*Dryocopus pileatus*). Fearing ridicule, he posted his sighting on the web where he described the bird without naming it.

Two weeks later Tim Gallagher from Cornell labs and Bob Harrison an expert birder went out with Sparling and on February 27th, after searching for two days, they both saw the bird. Harrison began sobbing and Gallagher was speechless. They then told Fitzpatrick who once said he'd "fall to his knees and weep", if he ever saw one. The Cornell group joined with the Nature Conservancy, which along with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service began quietly buying up more land to preserve a larger area along the White and Cache Rivers. In addition anonymous donors have put up more than a million dollars to help that effort and the Secretary of the Interior, Gail Norton, announced that the government would spend 10 million dollars for habitat protection and research. * The area, comprising about 850 square miles, is known as the Big Woods and is characterized by large bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) and water tupelo (*Nyssa aquatica*), even though it was once extensively logged.

Aside from field notes, the only evidence of the woodpecker is the four-second video shot from a canoe 60 feet away. Consequently, it is blurry and grainy. The bird is visible as a small object on the tree trunk and takes flight at the approach of the canoe. A frame-by-frame analysis of the video enabled the authors to provide several lines of evidence to buttress their conclusion that the bird is an ivory-billed woodpecker and not a pileated woodpecker. The size of the woodpecker on the tree matches that of the larger ivory-billed. The wing pattern of the woodpecker seen in the initial frames when it is perched on the tree trunk is that of an ivory-billed. When the woodpecker takes flight white patches are visible on the posterior half of the wings, which would be black for a pileated.

As the woodpecker rises in flight, white plumage is clearly evident on the back between the wings where only the ivory-billed would have it.

When it could be seen, the bird's crest has always been red, so it is possible that all the sightings have been of one male (the female's crest is black). Ivory-billed woodpeckers live no more than 15 years, so the bird(s) seen in the Big Woods had to have hatched no earlier than the 1990's and could represent the offspring of a breeding population. The alternative that this is the last living ivory-billed woodpecker would be a depressing blow to nature lovers everywhere. Let's hope for the best outcome.

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*At the same time that the federal government is helping to protect the woodpecker by adding more land to the refuge, the Bush administration has repealed the roadless rule banning roadbuilding and logging in unspoiled areas of our national forests.