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Wednesday, November 11, 2009

Story Date: Friday, July 8, 2005  
**Quest for the 'holy grail bird'**

By Aldemaro Romero and Jim Bednarz

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of occasional features on science topics to be produced by Arkansas State University faculty members.

A piece of news is "hot" if during the first week after its announcement more than 300,000 searches on the topic take place through Google's online search engine, and the news is printed in most every major newspaper around the globe.

An ivory-billed woodpecker had been sighted for the first time in North America since 1944, and this time there was a video to back up the claim. For birders (as bird watchers and lovers are known) this was the news of a lifetime.

The ivory-billed woodpecker is no ordinary bird. It is the largest species of woodpecker known to inhabit North America, about 20 inches long and boasting a 31-inch wingspan. First reported for Arkansas by John James Audubon in the 1820s, this is an animal that, because of its unusual tuxedo aristocrat look and its large and strong bill, has always commanded the attention of anyone who ever heard of it.

Some early settlers in the Southeast even called it "Lord God Woodpecker."

Its original distribution was throughout the Southeastern United States and Cuba. Although well-known and sought after, it was never abundant: Scientists have calculated that an observer can generally find one pair for every six to 17 square miles, with the largest number of individuals ever seen together at one time being 11.

They favor as food the larvae of large longhorn beetles found concentrated in the large, recently-dead trees of old-growth forests.

As for many species the cause of their decline has been habitat destruction; hunting and over-collecting has also played a role.

Jerome Jackson, author of "In Search of the Ivory-Billed Woodpeckers," considered Arkansas as a low-likelihood state for this bird to be found. After all, only five specimens located in collections were from the Natural State.

Shortly after Gene Sparling from Hot Springs saw that bird on Feb. 11, 2004, word got out to members of the Cornell University Lab of

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Ornithology, who organized methodical searchers for the bird, including a faculty member and several students from Arkansas State University. Of some 50 searchers involved in the recent survey for the ivory-bill, Dr. David Luneau from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock was lucky enough to obtain a brief recording of the bird on videotape.

Proof was important given that since 1944 numerous sightings had been reported, most of which were received with responses ranging from skepticism to ridicule. After all, the ivory-billed woodpecker was the "holy grail bird" of birders, and anyone claiming to have seen it had better have a picture or a recording of its calls since this is a species that could be easily confused with the smaller pileated woodpecker.

The announcement was made through *Science*, one of the most respected scientific journals in the world, and through its Web site one can see the grainy but convincing 4-second video clip.

This was an incredible discovery because among other things the bird was found in an area already protected:

The Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, a fact that has reinvigorated the hope of finding other specimens elsewhere.

For more information contact the Department of Biological Sciences at Arkansas State Information at: [biology@astate.edu](mailto:biology@astate.edu).

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