

The Ivory-Bill Returns

The announcement on *Science Online* (28 April 2005) of the persistence of the ivory-billed woodpecker has received more press attention than any bird news in my lifetime, and perhaps in all of history. In the hope that all the fuss has not exhausted our appetite for rejoicing over this development, we publish herewith the paper in print, along with an appropriate cover, and the following appreciation from your editor, a birder since boyhood.

Why is there so much excitement about this discovery—enough to generate over 300,000 Google searches, an editorial in the *New York Times*, and an Internet traffic jam on the many sites that serve America's six million birders? It should bring a thrill to everyone who cares about nature and about the diversity of life on Earth. My use of the word “return” in the title reflects much of the mainstream commentary about the finding, but it's not an apt description. It only seems as though the ivory-bill has arisen from the ashes. In fact, it never went away, so it can hardly be said to have returned.

Some will say, “It's only one bird.” Well, maybe and maybe not. At least we now know that a mated pair of ivory-bills existed in these Arkansas forests and laid the egg that hatched this bird at least 40 years after the last confirmed record of the species from North America. We must now recognize that previous claimed sightings, some of them by experienced observers, should probably not have been disregarded. We should encourage future naturalists and other watchers in likely habitats to report their observations carefully so that they can be evaluated. Most important, this surprising news underscores the need to conserve ecologically suitable habitats for vanishing species, even when hope seems to have been lost.

I must add a note about the personal excitement and pleasure this discovery has brought me. The sense of excitement began about 2 months ago when I received a somewhat cryptic e-mail from John Fitzpatrick, the head of Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology (located in a nice piece of deciduous forest called Sapsucker Woods). Fitzpatrick's message inquired as to whether *Science* would be interested in reviewing a report confirming the persistence of a bird (I believe he said “iconic” bird) long thought to have been extinct. That was not a difficult code to break, and I got back to him in a New York second!

The pleasure came because the involvement of the Cornell laboratory closed a circle for me. As a boy in the 1930s, I was a faithful follower of *National Geographic* accounts of Cornell expeditions to Louisiana to record and photograph these magnificent birds. I even wrote a fan letter to the expedition's leader, the pioneer Cornell ornithologist Arthur Allen. My mother supervised my 7-year-old grammar and penmanship but failed to edit the sign-off that kids use for relatives. I signed it “Love, Donny.” I was happily surprised when Professor Allen responded to my questions with an official-looking letter on Cornell stationery. To my mother's amused delight, he signed it “Love, Arthur.” How pleased this generous man would have been by his successors' find.

Cornell and the Nature Conservancy, a partner in the venture, deserve all the credit they have been given. But it is only fair to single out Gene Sparling of Hot Springs, Arkansas, who first found the bird, made the identification, and then guided two members of the Cornell team into the right area. No one who heard the interview of these three on National Public Radio can be unaware of the thrill this amateur naturalist had from his discovery or of the excitement it brought to his two colleagues. It is fortunate for science that it attracts people who may lack special training or higher degrees but have found the knowledge and confidence to know that they can do real science. Generations of British parson naturalists have given us centuries of first-flowering dates for British plants, and a national brigade of observers who assist Cornell with the Partners in Flight program have expanded our knowledge of bird distribution and migration. For Gene Sparling, the Cornell team, and the partner organizations who have helped preserve the Arkansas habitat, an appropriate salutation would be the ancient Hebrew blessing: “Baruch Mechayei haMetim”: “Blessed is the one who gives life to the dead.”

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