

The Ivory-bill Chronicles, Chapter 2
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We are in the midst of moving the project from the planning phase to the activity phase. An important component of the activity phase will be volunteer participation. The GCBO search effort in Texas is part of a larger multistate effort coordinated and funded by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service with cooperation from Cornell University. When word of the GCBO Texas project got out I received a number of offers from people who would like to take part as volunteers. It quickly became apparent to me that in order have a well coordinated effort some form of volunteer orientation was going to be absolutely essential. I am in the process of developing an orientation, which will probably require the better part of a day to present. All field searchers in the project, whether volunteer or staff, will be required to attend an orientation. Tentatively the orientation will take place Saturday April 22 at the Big Thicket Association Field Research Station in Saratoga, Texas. This location is about half way between Houston and Beaumont and so will be relatively convenient for folks from throughout the region.

Some of the issues that need to be covered are:

- 1) What we know about the lives of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers and at what point that knowledge becomes conjecture.
- 2) Search protocols to be followed by all participants.
- 3) Identification of birds encountered in the field. Since the original announcement of the Arkansas rediscovery there has been a small segment of the ornithological community that has been less than happy with the quality of the documentary evidence that has been presented to substantiate the sightings. This is inevitable in a scientific setting and everyone involved agrees that stronger documentation is vital. We can be no less demanding of any possible encounters that might occur in our own project.
- 4) How to properly document an encounter (“encounter” here meaning any visual or auditory contact). This will emphasize the need to have a video or still camera, preferably digital and with a lens suitable to the task, with whose operation the user is thoroughly familiar, and/or an audio recording device with suitable microphone, constantly ready to employ.
- 5) The use of GPS to navigate in roadless areas and to establish waypoints to mark possible encounters or other items of interest such as feeding sign on trees and tree cavities.
- 6) Personal safety issues, including getting lost, boating accidents, hypothermia, and encounters with stinging insects or poisonous snakes.
- 7) Land access issues including the regulations of the individual land management entities with which we have working agreements.
- 8) Communication. This includes the necessity to have established communication with someone, usually the project coordinator, at all times when in the field. This will primarily be via cell phone, but may include other means where cell phone coverage is inadequate. It also includes communication of project activities to

persons outside the project. Some information may be sensitive for a variety of reasons and this topic will be covered.

I know all this sounds a bit intimidating, but each of these topics is important to the overall effort. The personal safety of project participants and the welfare of the potentially existing Ivory-billed Woodpeckers that might be found must be our first priority. There are some important skills that are beyond our ability to instruct, such as canoe handling and water safety. Participants desiring to take part in activities involving such matters are expected to be proficient and knowledgeable.

I will be involved in an aerial reconnaissance of the primary search areas along the Sabine, Neches, and Trinity Rivers during the month of March. The goal is to identify priority areas for ground searches. Preliminary indications seem to be that the cypress-tupelo association that borders the numerous sloughs, bayous, and oxbow lakes withstood Hurricane Rita much better than either the bottomland hardwoods or the upland pine communities. Given the large numbers of trees down in those habitats throughout the whole region most access to search areas is expected to be by boat.

I will post information about the volunteer orientation session(s) as soon as plans are firm. In the meanwhile an excellent way to familiarize oneself with the search effort thus far is to thoroughly review the Cornell website at <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/ivory/>. Many of the topics I have listed above are addressed at this site and it makes fascinating reading.

The Chronicles will be continued.....