

The Ivory-bill Chronicles, Chapter 3
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One of the key strategies of the search project was to be extensive aerial reconnaissance over the entire search area. Ideally this was to have been done very early in the project before the new spring foliage obscured the view, but the wheels of bureaucracy often turn slowly, so it was mid April before I finally managed to get into the air over southeast Texas. The canopy was 90% leafed out so this was primarily a habitat survey. Actually, that was exactly what was needed as the search area had been identified in general terms only from assumptions and second-hand knowledge. After flying over the entire region at 500 feet I was able to reduce the area for priority ground searches by half. This will allow us to more efficiently utilize financial and time resources.

The view of the region from 500 feet is most illuminating. Some of the habitat corridors along the lower Sabine and Neches Rivers were more extensive and of higher quality than expected. On the other hand the general aspect of the area is one of extensive pine plantations, pastures, and rural development with little natural forest cover. It is obvious that any remnant populations of Ivory-billed Woodpecker would be quite isolated and would be highly unlikely to cross the extensive hostile landscape between small areas of suitable habitat.

One of my first objectives was to determine whether spotting Ivory-billeds from small aircraft would be an effective search tactic. This remains to be seen. The plane I flew in was not capable of cruising below 100 kts., about 120 mph, and at that speed a bird seen is behind you in a couple of seconds. Turning back to look for it requires flying a large circle and usually whatever was initially seen cannot be relocated. In another aircraft, perhaps a helicopter, and under bare canopy conditions I still think this still might be a viable tactic. I have decided to defer any further flights until the leaf drop next fall.

A volunteer orientation was held in May at the Big Thicket Association Field Research Station, a first-rate facility in the small town of Saratoga. Since that time field work has been conducted along both the Neches and Sabine Rivers and field excursions are planned to continue every couple of weeks through the summer and early fall prior to the start of the full-time search scheduled for the first of November.

Several interesting cavities have been located and marked for future surveillance. Fortunately there are several existing photographs of active Ivory-bill nest and roost cavities and at least one was cut down and is preserved at the Smithsonian. Thus we know what size and shape of cavity to be on the lookout for. Numerous obvious Pileated Woodpecker cavities have also been found. A problem is that other woodpeckers and some mammals may work over a Pileated cavity after it has been abandoned by the makers and change the configuration and size of the opening, making them look more like the typical Ivory-bill cavity. Rather than spend a lot of observer time watching a suspect cavity we may be able to borrow a time-lapse video camera to set up on interesting looking cavities or other woodpecker sign such as bark-scaling. The Chronicles will be continued.....

