

FIELD RESEARCH

CHASING A DREAM:
THE IVORY-BILL CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 7
By John C Arvin, Research Coordinator

The field search for the possibility that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers might still inhabit the bottomland forests along the corridors of the large rivers in southeastern Texas came to an end on April 1. The team of three field biologists went their separate ways; I packed up all the gear and data generated in the six-month search and brought it back to Lake Jackson for storage or analysis.

Though not all data have been completely analyzed and entered into the on-line database set up for the multi-state project, it is clear that there is no compelling evidence that the species still exists, at least not in the areas we were able to search. That, of course, still leaves lots of appropriate habitat unsearched. We were limited to public lands, which constitute only about 10% of the total area that might harbor Ivory-bills. The 90% left unsearched is private property, and the great majority of that (over one million acres) belongs to a single timber company. That company has protected their lands from fragmentation for decades. Unfortunately, about the same time that the active search was winding down, we learned that this company announced its intention to divest itself of its timber properties. This will allow those properties to be broken up into small tracts and sold off for timbering, or more likely, weekend retreats for city dwellers, thus putting these great forests beyond the reach of the conservation community. One hopes that some solution can be worked out to avoid fragmentation of this critical habitat.

The effort is not yet over, either locally or nationally. Part of the project was to profile the existing habitat in the areas searched for the bird. A graduate student from Rice University was hired to complete the profiling in the Big Thicket National Preserve while I do the same in the Trinity National Wildlife Refuge with the help of Jim Neal, our grant administrator from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. There are some magnificent trees out there--the kind of trees you stand people up against and take their pictures. There is also an assortment of critters including some itchy ticks and lots of Golden Orb Weaver spiders whose webs wrap you up like a mummy after a few hours of pushing your way through the woods. It also tends to become warmish on these summer afternoons.

In July I will attend a meeting of all the parties involved in the multi-state search project to discuss where the project goes from here. There has already been a good deal of discussion about helicopter searches when the leaves are off, which would be an ideal way to search the Texas area due to the private property issue. Of course helicopter time is very expensive, so whether over-flights are justifiable is yet to be determined. After this meeting, a general announcement of results from the entire search effort will be forthcoming from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, who has funded our Texas survey in full.

The Chronicles will be continued or concluded as the coming year's plan indicates.