

THE IVORY-BILL CHRONICLES, CHAPTER 8

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The first year of our survey of the historic Texas range of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (IBWO) officially concluded at the end of November. Actually, the field work conducted after April was a vegetation profile of the areas searched by the IBWO team and volunteers last winter and spring. We found no evidence that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers persisted in the search area (the Big Thicket National Preserve on the lower Neches River including the Village Creek drainage, and the Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge on the lower Trinity River).

Our search techniques included stationary watches at strategic locations, playback of recorded calls and drum-notes, and locating cavities and bark work indicative of known or suspected Ivory-bill examples. These were then monitored either directly by observation or remotely by time-lapse still video cameras. In addition, remote Autonomous Recording Units (ARUs), on loan from our friends at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, were deployed in areas that were thought to have higher than average potential for birds to be present. These deployments were for two week periods, during which time the ARUs recorded all sounds in the vicinity on a fixed schedule.

Vegetation profiling started in May and continued through early November. In all, a random sample of forty-one 500-acre "patches" of old growth bottomland forest was searched and their forest vegetation profiled. This was accomplished by virtue of hundreds of person-hours spent searching areas far from roads or trails on foot and by canoe or kayak. Coverage was documented by GPS tracks overlaid onto digitized aerial photographs.

On June 13, as I was measuring trees in the Trinity River bottom, a bird making loud wooden wing beat noises approached me from behind. I assumed that it was a Wood Duck, a common species in that habitat. As the bird passed me on the left, I half turned to see it. It dodged behind some canopy foliage but I caught a brief glimpse as it passed an opening in the foliage. It was a large black-and-white woodpecker. Most of the early ornithologists who wrote about Ivory-billed Woodpeckers mentioned a mechanical wing noise such as this. An example was even recorded on the brief recording made by the Cornell Lab expedition to the Singer Tract in 1935. I have never heard a similar wing noise from flying Pileated Woodpeckers.

I waited in the vicinity for an hour or so but the bird had gone and did not come back. I immediately sent inquiries to all the people I could think of who know Pileated Woodpeckers well. None had ever heard a wooden wing sound. On that slender thread hangs my hope that a remnant population might remain in Texas. It is ranked as a "possible encounter" among a number of others from searches conducted in other southern states.

We have recently received funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service for another year of surveys in Texas forests. Our plan for 2008 is to conduct searches from the air when the trees are completely leafless in January and February, ideally covering the entire lower drainages of the Sabine, Neches, and Trinity Rivers. Ground searches will focus on the Trinity River where much habitat remains unsearched due to time constraints last season. As part of the plan, the ground searches will be conducted by an all-volunteer crew, which will have an opportunity to explore some of the last old-growth

bottomland forest in Texas and may encounter a complete (we hope!) cast of characters of that vanishing habitat.