

Florida's ivory-billed woodpecker is officially extinct—but a few still hope

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In the Green Swamp of Polk County, Florida, Paul Sykes heard a sound that raised the hairs on the back of his neck. The sharp honk may have sounded, to a layperson, like a stepped-on squeaky toy. But to Sykes, a

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist then based in Delray Beach, it sounded like the recordings he'd heard of the spectral ivory-billed woodpecker.

It was 1967, more than 20 years after the last undisputed sighting of the bird. Sykes climbed out of the Jeep, looked toward the tree the sound had come from—and saw a blue jay. An imitator. Like so many throughout the latter half of the 20th century, Sykes thought he'd found an ivory-bill, only to come away empty-handed.

For the next four decades, Sykes kept looking for the bird, he wrote in a 2016 article published by the U.S. Geological Survey. He never found it.

Last week, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officially declared the ivory-billed woodpecker extinct, along with 22 other plant and [animal species](#). The bureaucratic decision dampens hope in finding the bird that once thrived in the bottomlands and long-leaf pines of Florida and sprawling forests throughout the southeast.

For decades, reports had emerged intermittently, rousing intrigue and skepticism in ornithology circles.

In the absence of proof, the bird ceased to be a bird. It was a ghost, a Holy Grail. It stood for obsession and salvation. If it still lived, it meant it had survived the wrath humans inflicted upon its habitat.

"I think it kind of represents a hope that some of what we lost in the 1900s, the passenger pigeons and Carolina parakeets and creatures that have gone extinct, that maybe it isn't quite as bad, maybe there's some hope that some of these things are still around," said Andy Kratter, the ornithology collection manager at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. "Maybe the human species isn't so bad after all."

Somewhere under all that symbolic weight was the thing itself. It stood two feet tall, larger than any other North American woodpecker, but flew in a manner that John J. Audubon called "graceful in the extreme." Its feathers were iridescent black, with broad bands of white on the wings and a white jag racing toward the eye. A flame-red crest lept from the heads of males.

It even had a majestic nickname, derived from the exclamation it was said to evoke in onlookers but also sounding, appropriately, like a prayer to things unseen.

The Lord God Bird.

The remains of seven ivory-billed woodpeckers rest in the natural history museum's collection, kept off display to prevent light damage. Kratter estimates there are fewer than 1,000 other specimens scattered across the globe.

"Of course," he said, "there's not going to be any more, ever."

Ivory-billed woodpeckers once inhabited forests from Florida to North Carolina and southern Illinois, with a subspecies in the mountains of Cuba. But after the Civil War, the booming lumber industry chewed away at the southeast's woodlands and carved a once-sprawling habitat into disconnected tracts.

By the early 20th century, according to the natural history museum, hardly any land left in Florida could sustain the woodpecker. Years went without a sighting; some ornithologists considered it extinct. Then, in 1924, an ornithologist traveling in Florida discovered a nesting pair of birds and, for the first time, photographed them. Soon after, a pair of local taxidermists shot them.

In the 1930s, ornithologists captured film and audio of the woodpecker on an enormous timber tract in northeastern Louisiana. But the forest was destroyed despite efforts to preserve the land. The last universally accepted sighting of the bird was there in 1944.

In the late 1960s, a pair of researchers surveying bald eagles for the Florida Audubon Society reported nearly a dozen sightings of ivory-billed woodpeckers in Hardee and Highlands counties, though the feathers they collected there have never been proven to belong to an ivory-bill.

The Fish and Wildlife Service listed the bird as endangered in 1967. Six years later, the Endangered Species Act passed. The law has helped protect and even restore the numbers of some of Florida's most iconic fauna: the American alligator, the West Indian manatee, the Florida panther.

But by the time it passed, some scientists believe, it was already too late for the ivory-bill.

Geoff Hill thinks they're wrong.

Hill, an ornithologist at Auburn University, speaks of the ivory-billed woodpecker in the present tense. In 2005, he and some of his students kayaked down the Choctawhatchee River in the Florida Panhandle and, he said, "right into the ivory-billed woodpeckers."

Over the next two years, Hill and his team searched the region—from the town of Ponce de Leon south to the Gulf of Mexico—and came away with more than a dozen sightings and scores of recordings of what he says are ivory-bills. Hill published a paper in the peer-reviewed journal *Avian Conservation and Ecology* and wrote a book about the experience. Still, he admitted, he lacked the hard proof that would bring

skeptics to his side.

Hill journeyed into the swamps of the Panhandle just weeks after the journal *Science* in 2005 published a paper by more than a dozen authors, including scientists from Cornell University and The Nature Conservancy, who proclaimed that the ivory-bill had been found in the Big Woods of eastern Arkansas. The report hinged on a low-resolution video purportedly showing an ivory-billed woodpecker in flight.

When Ann Paul, the president of the Tampa Audubon Society, heard the Arkansas news on the radio one morning, she wept in joy at the idea the bird might still exist, she said. But in the years since, as searches stalled out and the Arkansas report came under fire, she said she and many other birders accepted that it was gone. Last week's announcement felt like an ending to the bird's story.

"Until you finally say it's over, you always hope it's not over," said Paul, who's also the president of the Florida Ornithological Society.

Jerome Jackson, a professor emeritus at Florida Gulf Coast University, suggested in a 2006 article that the Arkansas searchers had seen only a pileated woodpecker, a similar-looking but much less rare bird. He admonished the quick acceptance of their sightings as "faith-based ornithology."

"The ivory-bill is likely extinct," Jackson wrote in an email this week, "but a bureaucratic decision to declare it's extinct doesn't prove that it isn't out there ... somewhere ..."

So little old-growth forest is left in the southeast, he said, that it's hard to believe any birds are left—even a single pair would need about seven square miles of undisturbed forest to survive.

Jackson hopes the declaration of nearly two dozen species as extinct will revitalize efforts to save other species that remain. But he also worries that species moving from endangered to extinct will open the door for their habitats to be degraded even more.

Hill prefers to take the lack of evidence as a sign that the [birds](#) have pulled off a trick: After centuries of humans threatening their existence, they've figured out how to avoid people altogether.

"If the bird does exist—I think it does—and it's eluded all efforts to document it to the point where officials declared it extinct, that's a huge win for the bird," he said. "It's its own animal doing its own thing in total defiance to humans."

Hill believes the ivory-bill could still dwell in those Panhandle swamps, murky and ever-shifting. It's the kind of place someone could search for a long time, where a creature might still hide from sight.

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