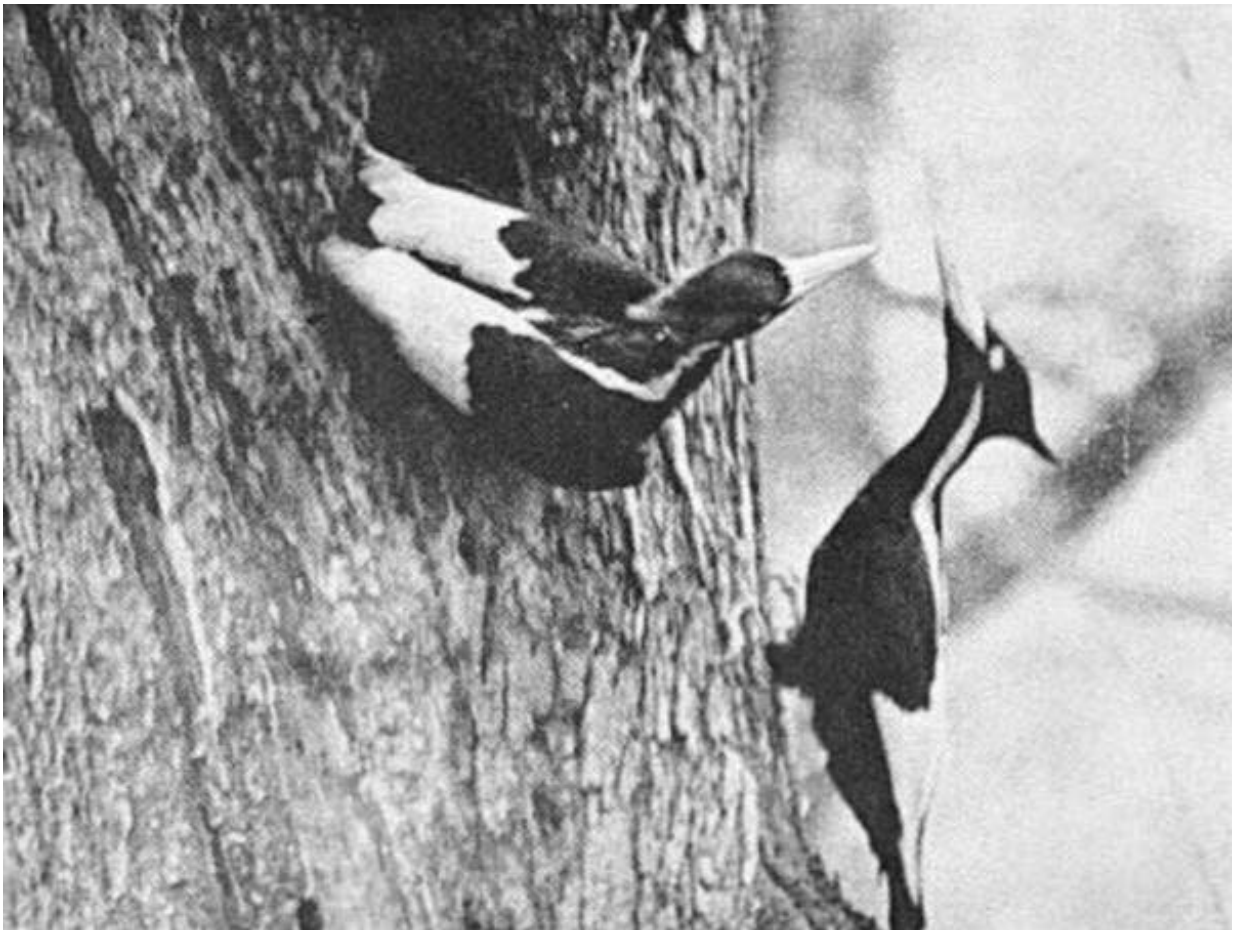


It may be extinct, but the story of the ivory-billed woodpecker isn't over yet

November 1 2021, by Hannah Hunter



The male ivorybill leaves as the female returns. Photo taken in Singer Tract, La., in April 1935. The last undisputed observation of an ivory-billed woodpecker occurred in 1944. Credit: Arthur A. Allen/Wikipedia

Since the Endangered Species Act was established nearly 50 years ago in the United States, the Fish and Wildlife Service has [prevented the extinction of more than 99 percent of the species listed in the act.](#)

Unfortunately, even federal protection cannot totally protect American wildlife from what scientists call the "[sixth mass extinction.](#)"

In its most recent report to the U.S. government, the Fish and Wildlife Service identified 23 lost causes, including the Kauai O'o, Bachman's warbler and seven freshwater mussel species. Few have caused as much outcry, though, as the iconic ivory-billed woodpecker.

Known as the "Lord God Bird" or "Holy Grail Bird" due to its impressive stature, striking plumage, loud drumming and incredible rarity, the ivory-billed woodpecker was once found in the old-growth forests of the southeastern U.S., from Florida to southern Illinois and from North Carolina to eastern Texas, as well as in Cuba.

It was all but decimated in the U.S. in the 1800s due to the combination of industrial [logging after the Civil War and hunting by scientific specimen collectors,](#) and it has [dipped in and out of presumed extinction ever since.](#)

On Sept. 20, after decades of debate and nearly 80 years since the last undisputed sighting, the Fish and Wildlife Service declared its intention to remove the ivorybill from the Endangered Species List because it considers the bird extinct.

As a [graduate student](#) studying the culture and politics of the ivorybill—and its conservation and extinction—I believe the announcement may be one of the most disputed extinction events in American history. The ivorybill is a symbol of the Southern wilderness, a region that [some argue has not been at the forefront of U.S. conservation policy.](#) And advocates worry that removing the bird from federal

protection will [open up its habitat for exploitation](#).

A blurry four-second video

The last commonly accepted sighting of the ivorybill was in 1944, when the National Audubon Society president sent Don Eckelberry, a 23-year-old wildlife artist, [to Louisiana's Singer Tract to sketch a female bird](#), rumoured to be the last in the U.S.

Dozens of alleged sightings of the bird have been reported since then. Many of them are amateur reports easily dismissed as sightings of pileated woodpeckers, [a smaller, more common relative](#). Others are less clear cut. For instance, photos presented to the American Ornithological Union in 1971 were rejected as fraud, a taxidermied specimen the photographer had mounted on trees. But [some ornithologists now believe they were authentic](#).

There have been other alleged sightings. Ornithologists from Auburn University [repeatedly observed and heard birds they identified as ivorybills in the swamp forest in Florida in 2005 and 2006](#). Acoustic scientist and amateur birder Michael Collins [recorded sounds resembling ivorybill knocks and calls](#) in Louisiana from 2006 to 2008. In this same search period, [he also captured several blurry video recordings of what he believes are ivory-billed woodpeckers](#).

The ivorybill debate peaked in 2005, when a team of researchers from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology [claimed to have rediscovered the ivorybill at a wildlife refuge in eastern Arkansas](#). The seven reported sightings and the blurry four-second-long video they offered as evidence weren't exactly clear, but the group's reputation sparked excitement that the ivory-billed woodpecker had been resurrected. Based on the evidence, the [U.S. government pledged over US\\$10 million towards the bird's recovery effort](#).

Skeptics, however, soon questioned the reports. Ivorybill expert Jerome Jackson [published an influential rebuttal seven months later](#), claiming that the ornithologists had actually seen a pileated woodpecker. Although it initially believed the 2005 sightings, the Fish and Wildlife Service's recent report dismisses these and all post-1944 sightings, saying [none has the necessary evidence to back them up](#).



The pileated woodpecker is easily confused with the ivory-billed woodpecker. Pileated woodpeckers have smaller, darker bills and a white throat. Credit: Joshlaymon/Wikimedia

Avian doppelgangers

Objective evidence, in the view of the Fish and Wildlife Service, would include "clear photographs, feathers of demonstrated recent origins, specimens, etc." Blurry photos and video could easily be images of another bird. Sound recordings could be of other [birds](#) too, and with only one surviving undisputed recording from 1935, there is plenty of room for doubt.

Ivorybill searchers, including Collins, argue the agency's benchmark is unfair, as the ivorybill's habitat of deep, unforgiving swamps—and its elusive nature—make such evidence near impossible to gather.

But the agency's criteria is informed by what they believe is appropriate for this species. They say the ivorybill's distinctive markings and decades of extensive survey efforts mean that if the bird does still live, it would have been conclusively documented by now.

For other species, the benchmark is different. For example, the Kauai O'o—also declared extinct in the same report—is a smaller and less visually detectable bird. [Since its vocalizations are distinctive](#), sound recordings might have been enough to prove its existence.

Grassroots searches continue

This chapter of American natural history isn't closed yet. The public has until Nov. 29 to [present evidence of the ivorybill's existence](#) to stop its removal from the Endangered Species Act.

There can be detrimental outcomes if a species is declared extinct too early. Removing federal protection eliminates conservation funding for the species and removes the pressure from states to protect the habitat. Other birds and vulnerable species in the area could also suffer. On the

other hand, the agency's decision is practical—removing a species with a low probability of revival frees up resources for others that might be saved.

Even if the ivorybill is officially extinct, people will continue to look for it. The grassroots group [Mission Ivorybill](#) begins a three-year search effort in Louisiana on Nov. 1. Matt Courtman, a former president of the Louisiana Ornithological Society who founded the group, told me that he saw a pair of ivorybills as recently as 2019. The group hopes to provide evidence to overturn the extinction declaration.

Species have been rediscovered after declared or presumed extinction before. In 1951, [scientists rediscovered the Bermuda petrel](#) after it had been "extinct" for 330 years. These "Lazarus" species—named after the Biblical story of Lazarus rising from the dead—include a whale, a buckwheat [species](#) and a stick insect.

Hope for the ivory-billed woodpecker may be found in Cuba, where some scientists, including those associated with the International Union of the Conservation of Nature, believe it may persist. Yet if the ivorybill is still living in the remote forests of the Southeastern U.S., the race is on to prove it in time to protect these iconic birds and their habitats.

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November 1) retrieved 11 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-11-extinct-story-ivory-billed-woodpecker-isnt.html>

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