

Videos show purported ivory-billed woodpeckers as US moves toward extinction decision

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An ivory-billed woodpecker specimen is on a display at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. New video and photographs purporting to show ivory-billed woodpeckers flying in a Louisiana forest were published by researchers Thursday, May 18, 2023, as government officials said they will make a final decision on whether the birds are extinct by the end of the year. Credit: AP Photo/Haven Daley, File

New video and photographs purporting to show ivory-billed woodpeckers flying in a Louisiana forest [were published by researchers](#) on Thursday, as government officials said they will make a final decision this year on whether the birds are extinct.

The images—grainy and taken from a distance by drones and trail cameras—offer tantalizing hints the large woodpecker may yet exist almost 80 years after the last agreed-upon sightings, in Louisiana.

Several experts said it adds to prior indications of their survival. They called on the government to drop the pending proposal to write off the so-called Lord God Bird—a nickname derived from the exclamation some viewers made upon seeing one.

But others dismissed the new research as inconclusive, including a scientist who said some of the footage clearly depicts another type of woodpecker many amateurs mistake for the ivory-billed.

The peer-reviewed research in the journal *Ecology and Evolution* comes from a group that's spent more than a decade searching for the woodpeckers at an undisclosed site.

It includes drone video from as recently as October that shows a pair of birds with black-and-white coloring on the wings that researchers say helps distinguish them as ivory-billed woodpeckers.

"The last time a pair of birds was photographed would have been in the 1930s, so it's really extraordinary on that level," said Mark Michaels with Project Principalis, which sponsored the work and said it was being shared with [federal wildlife officials](#).

The researchers also collected audio recordings of the woodpeckers and most of the [search team](#) had some kind of direct encounter, either seeing or hearing them, said Michaels and lead study author Steven Latta with the independent National Aviary in Pittsburgh.

An ivory-billed woodpecker would seem hard to miss with a 30-inch (76-centimeter) wingspan and a call reminiscent of a bulb bicycle horn. However, the bird's preferred habitat is dense woodlands that can be hard for people to navigate. Many of those areas were logged early last century and the most recent agreed-upon sighting was in 1944.

There have been multiple reported sightings over decades. None fully resolved doubt, and federal officials said in 2021 there was "no objective evidence" of the bird's continued existence.

After Project Principalis released early results of its work last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delayed the pending extinction declaration so it could take more public comment.

Federal officials want photos or videos all experts can agree on. Wildlife service spokesperson Christine Schuldheisz said the agency would "receive information on any species at any time."

One of the study's co-authors works at the wildlife service. A disclaimer said the research does not necessarily represent the agency's views.

Millions of dollars have been spent on prior search efforts.

Cornell University Professor John Fitzpatrick, who was involved in a years-long search launched two decades ago in Arkansas, said the latest videos and photos when added to prior sightings provide sufficient cause to drop the extinction proposal.

"The region they are working in is highly likely to be able support ivory-billed," he said.

Michael Collins, a scientist at the Naval Research Laboratory, said the videos show the similar but smaller pileated woodpecker, not the ivory-billed. Collins has published numerous papers on ivory-billed woodpeckers and claims to have seen them himself last decade in the Pearl River area along the Louisiana-Mississippi border.

In the new drone video showing a pair of birds, Collins said glare from the sun catches on their wings, causing them to look white.

"All of the [flight characteristics](#) are consistent with pileated woodpeckers but not ivory-billed woodpeckers," Collins said. "This video shows a pileated [woodpecker](#)."

Another ivory-billed expert, Geoffrey Hill from Auburn University, said Thursday's study offers a "compelling set of evidence" that ivory-billed woodpeckers persist. But Hill acknowledged it was unlikely to settle the debate.

"People have made up their minds. Unless they get smacked in the face with a dead bird or see it on an IMAX movie, they aren't going to change their minds," he said.

More information: Steven C. Latta et al, Multiple lines of evidence suggest the persistence of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) in Louisiana, *Ecology and Evolution* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/ece3.10017](#)

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