THE NATURAL WORLD

Tantalizing Traces of Ivory-Bills

By Malcolm G. Scully

"T"

HE LARGE SIZE and striking color pattern of the ivory-billed woodpecker have made it one of the most sought-after birds in the natural world. Its beauty and rarity have attracted the attention of bird watchers from around the globe, and its status as a threatened species has made it a symbol of the importance of preserving our natural environment.

However, despite years of intensive search efforts, the ivory-billed woodpecker has remained elusive. Efforts to locate and study the bird have been hindered by a lack of reliable sightings, as well as by the difficulty of verifying reports of its presence.

In recent years, however, there have been a few promising developments in the search for the ivory-billed woodpecker. A team of scientists has used advanced technology to track the movements of birds, and these studies have provided new insights into the bird's behavior and biology.

But as we continue to search for this magnificent creature, we must also consider the impact of our conservation efforts. The ivory-billed woodpecker is just one example of the many species that are threatened by habitat loss, climate change, and other human activities.

As we work to protect the environment, let us remember the importance of preserving not only our natural resources, but also the diversity of life that they support. Only through a shared commitment to conservation can we ensure that the ivory-billed woodpecker and other unique species continue to thrive for generations to come.

THE 30-DAY SEARCH was coordinated by James W. Gentry, Jr., curator of birds at the Louisiana State University's Museum of Natural Science. In that job, Gentry has heard a lot about ivory-billed woodpeckers, and when David Kuhn, the graduate student in forestry who reported seeing the pair in the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area in April 1999, told his story, Rensmen found it credible. Kuhn was not a quick, he says, and his descriptions of the birds, which he says he saw at close range, included all the appropriate field marks.

Before Kuhn's sighting was publicly announced, the team typically got four or five reports of ivory-billed woodpecker sightings a year. Since then, the number has soared to as high as 100 a month. Ninety-nine percent of them can be discounted, Rensmen says, as either misidentifications of pilated woodpeckers or other birds. But the other 1 percent, including Kuhn's, fit the criteria for further investigation: The observer knew pilated woodpeckers well, and he or she is struck by such markings as the extensive amount of white on the folded wings of the ivory-bill and the off-white color of its bill.

In those cases, he urges the observer to get a photograph of the bird or a recording of its calls. Only when such evidence is obtained will the continued existence of the ivory-billed woodpecker be generally accepted.

While the six searches have completed their 30-day assignment, it would be incorrect to say that the quest for the ivory-billed woodpecker has ended. In coordination with the search team, researchers from Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology have placed a dozen battery-operated "acoustic recording units" in promising habitats in the search area. The units will remain there until the middle of this month, at which point the 6,000 hours of sounds collected on them will be analyzed for the tell-tale cries of the bird.

And Kuhn and others agree that, while they did not establish the bird's existence, neither did they definitively demonstrate that it is extinct. In part that's because you cannot prove a negative, but some of the team members are more than agnostic about the status of the bird.

M. David Luneau Jr., an associate professor of engineering technology at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, says: "I believe that the ivory-billed woodpecker is not extinct." The search, he says, was his fourth trip to Louisiana to look for the bird, and "I am more convinced now than ever before that the ivory-billed woodpecker survived for 50 years under the radar screen of the world of birding and ornithology."

Skeptics, however, ask how, given the bird's rarity and its fame, it could escape detection.

Rensmen says that the bird's habits could provide part of the explanation. It is known to have foraged widely in search of recently dead trees that have been infested with the larvae of wood-boring beetles that make up a large part of its diet. If only a few of the woodpeckers exist, and they move constantly through inaccessible territory, they could—with some stretch of the imagination—escape notice.

"It's not only like looking for a needle in a haystack," Rensmen says, "it's looking for a needle that's moving."

He concedes that he is frustrated by the outcome of the search. The quest for the ivory-billed woodpecker has produced an ambiguous and, thus, unsatisfying result.

Even so, he says, "I read in the eyes of the birders that they think that the bird is really out there. This, combined with Kuhn and a few other less convincing but still intriguing sightings, is going to propel me toward planning another search of some sort."

That is, unless Cornell's recording units have captured the woodpecker's distinctive call.

Most observers believe that the ivory-billed woodpecker was never widely distributed, and at points in the early 20th century it was already considered extinct before being rediscovered in the 1980s. As Arthur Allen noted in his 1939 life history, "During the past 50 years long periods have elapsed when no individuals have been reported from any part of its range."

No one knows whether the 58 years since the last verified sighting in 1944 represent another such long period, or whether the death knell has already tolled.

Malcolm G. Scully is The Chronicle's editor at large.