



The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker

Tim Gallagher

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What is it about the ivory-billed woodpecker? Why does this ghost of the southern swamps arouse such an obsessive level of passion in its devotees, who range from respected researchers to the flakiest Loch Ness monster fanatics and Elvis chasers?

Since the early twentieth century, scientists have been trying their best to prove that the ivory-bill is extinct. But every time they think they've finally closed the door, the bird makes an unexpected appearance. It happened in the 1920s, and it's happened in almost every subsequent decade.

For more than 60 years, each sighting has been met with ridicule and scorn. Respected researchers and naturalists have been branded as quacks just for having the temerity to say that the ivory-bill still exists. Yet the reports still trickle in. Is there any truth to these sightings, or are they just a case of wishful thinking, misidentification, or outright fabrication?

To unravel the mystery, author Tim Gallagher heads south, deep into the eerie swamps and bayous of the vast Mississippi Delta, searching for people who claim to have seen this rarest of birds and following up—sometimes more than 30 years after the fact—on their sightings. He meets a colorful array of characters: a cigar-chomping ex-boxer who took two controversial pictures of an alleged ivory-bill in 1971; a former corporate lawyer who abandoned her career to search for ivory-bills full time; two men who grew up in the ivory-bill's last known stronghold in a final remnant of primeval forest in Louisiana.

With his buddy Bobby Harrison, a true son of the South from Alabama, Gallagher hits the swamps, wading through hip-deep, boot-sucking mud and canoeing through turgid, mud brown bayous where deadly cottonmouth water moccasins abound. In most cases, they are clearly decades too late. But when the two speak to an Arkansas backwoods kayaker who saw a mystery woodpecker the week before and has a description of the bird that is too good to be a fantasy, the hunt is on.

Their Eureka moment comes a few days later as a huge woodpecker flies in front of their canoe, and they both cry out, "Ivory-bill!" This sighting—the first time since 1944 that two qualified observers positively identify an ivory-billed woodpecker in the United States—quickly leads to the largest search ever launched to find a rare bird, as researchers fan out across the bayou, hoping to document the existence of this most iconic of birds.

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