

CONSERVATION NEWS

The Phantom of the Swamp

IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER, *CAMPEPHILUS PRINCIPALIS*

By William Marshall Pulliam



For those who don't understand why, in these days of extinction everywhere, the resurrection of some "bird thing" is so noteworthy, I offer this:

The Ivorybill is not just a swamp bird — it is *the* Swamp Bird. Even more than 'gators and Bald Cypress, it is the very embodiment of antiquity, wildness, remoteness, the primeval mystery of the deep dark woods and waters. The very name carried magical, spiritual significance, like dragons or centaurs. Like the other magical creatures, they vanished when civilization entered their realm. The Ivorybill became metaphor for everything that technology and settlement had driven away, into the farthest recesses of the wilderness or even entirely from the face of the planet. A swamp "deep enough for Ivorybills" was one that was entirely beyond human influence. They became a phantom, a rumor, something in which no rational people were supposed to believe. By the 1970s, searching for Ivorybills was viewed with nearly the same eye as searching for

Bigfoot. Someone who claimed a sighting of one was likely to be treated worse than someone who reported seeing a UFO. The Ivorybill's status became almost godlike — and rational scientists aren't supposed to believe in gods.

But the stories persisted. Hunters, mostly, and the occasional boater told mysterious and intriguing tales; but no one could confirm, no one could produce a photograph, a recording, a feather, even a flake of wood that was unequivocal. Just a few years ago, what seemed to be a very promising lead in extreme southwestern Mississippi was finally taken seriously and pursued actively — but it was more of the same: hints, tantalizing signs, unusual noises, but in the end ... nothing. The failure of the Pearl River expedition after such promising signs was a serious blow to us few hopeful holdouts.

And so comes along Mr. Sparling in his kayak and the huge red-crested woodpecker with the big white spot on its back that landed on a tree in front of him some 14 months ago. A year of follow-up and amazingly well-kept secrecy — and then the announcement. A dragon is perched on top of the Empire State building, Elvis calls a press conference to apologize for having been away so long, a flock of Thunderbirds circles Mount Rushmore and they are pecking George Washington's eyes out, and the Lord God Woodpecker is happily cruising the swamps of Arkansas.

Anything can happen.