

# ABOUT BOOKS

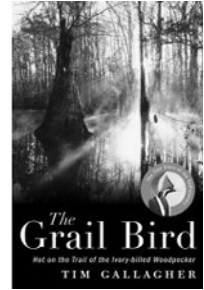
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## The Extinction Biz

Mark Lynch

The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Tim Gallagher. 2005. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

“What I wanted was to travel and see all the different animals that were on the verge of extinction.” Leonardo DiCaprio



When the news broke this spring, it was greeted with the same kind of knee-jerk unchecked, ecstatic outpourings typically reserved for the second coming of (insert name of appropriate deity, rock singer, movie star *here*). The news reports of some sightings of the long-thought-extinct Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas in 2004 were immediately followed by cheers, joyful weeping, huge sighs of relief, and attempts to charter buses to go down there and get in on what promised to be the mega-tick of the century. Even the Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton, got on the “feel good” bandwagon and in a perfect photo-op from RNC heaven, got all misty-eyed. Wow! A woodpecker finally unites the Red states and the Blue states in preservation bliss! Build all the roads you want through old-growth forest and plumb the pristine expanses of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil; at least the Ivory-bill is safe. Back from the brink of extinction and coming soon to a T-shirt at a birdseed store near you. With all the media coverage, cooler, more reasoned assessments of the evidence, along with its real significance, were typically lacking in the birding community listserve chat storms that quickly ensued.

Maybe it was bad toilet training as a child, but I have always been a rather skeptical sort. Some would say “curmudgeonly.” I like to weigh any evidence quietly and carefully and save the outbursts of spontaneous earthy-crunchy glee for the next Flaming Lips concert. As one dear friend remarked after viewing the videotaped evidence: “I have seen better and longer films of the Sasquatch.” And he had a point. Many more folks EVERY YEAR report being abducted by aliens, and they sound just as sincere and report their sightings with just as much detail as I was hearing and reading in the news about the woodpecker. Not that I was dismissing the sightings out of hand—far from it—but you can never go wrong with a calm and critical approach to any evidence of an event this extraordinary.

But even accepting the veracity of the reports, it was the manner in which the story broke that really bothered me. The sightings were almost a year old, so why break the story now? A year later, and there still seemed to be some confusion as to what the next steps would be in dealing with the sudden appearance of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Who was in charge? Was the huge area of the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, a popular hunting and fishing destination to many, to be entirely closed? How would you even accomplish that? How were the inevitable visiting

masses of birders to be managed? I went to a web site from the local Fish and Wildlife folks and found a map showing exactly where the sightings had taken place. It was like an open invitation to the birding hordes to come down and try their luck. Controlling access to such a wilderness area seemed well-nigh impossible. Birders were only the most obvious concern. In a “worse case” scenario, some unscrupulous wealthy ne’er-do-well could put a bounty on the last Ivory-billed Woodpecker and make some local a tempting offer he or she could not refuse. And what about the legendary and nefarious egg collectors?

More to the point, was there any evidence from these meager and brief sightings of a viable population of these magnificent woodpeckers? Or, were they “effectively extinct?” Did the Ivory-billed Woodpecker currently have a population that was far too low, say in the single digits, to have any kind of real genetic variation? Were a few geriatric birds doomed to live their final days with their every call and ruffle of feathers under the watchful scrutiny of ornithologists with state of the art recording devices and birders with state of the art bins? Is this the way we want to experience extinction? In America, we have “been there/done that” with the Heath Hen, Passenger Pigeon, and the Dusky Seaside Sparrow. In each case a single bird survived for years in either a known location in the wild or in captivity and then, sadly and inevitably, died. I find these stories of the “last of their kind” birds eking out their final years profoundly depressing and certainly not causes for joyful weeping and celebration.

Imagine my surprise, when less than two weeks after the announcement of the existence of a still-living Ivory-billed Woodpecker, a book detailing that very discovery arrives at my house complete with full publicity campaign. It takes time to write and publish a book and get together publicity materials. Did this mean that the publisher knew BEFORE the rest of the world?

Tim Gallagher is a writer, photographer, and editor in chief of *Living Bird*, the flagship publication of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. He is not an ornithologist, but he is a serious and passionate observer of wildlife. *The Grail Bird* is his unapologetically excited reporting of his sighting of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Well, eventually it gets around to that. The book starts with a brief and perfunctory summary of the history of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and the causes for its decline. Much of this material has been covered before and better in Phillip Hoose’s *The Race To Save the Lord God Bird*, though Gallagher does add some new twists. For instance, he talks to Nancy Tanner, widow of Jim Tanner, who worked tirelessly to save the last Ivory-bills in the Singer Tract. She admits, “If Jim were still here, no one would even want to talk to me” (p. 37). From a more personal perspective, it was also nice to see Worcester’s legendary birder Davis Crompton mentioned. In 1948, he and John Dennis traveled to Cuba to track down rumors of surviving woodpeckers.

*The Grail Bird* really strikes off on its own when Gallagher begins to investigate Ivory-bill sightings made AFTER the last generally accepted sighting of a woodpecker on mainland North America by Don Eckelberry in April of 1944.

This was the backdrop when I began my project. My goal was to find as many people as possible who had taken part in these searches or sightings, and if these sightings seemed credible, to follow up on them myself. In many cases the trail had gone cold—everyone involved in a particular sighting was either dead or difficult to track down. In other cases I did find people (many of whom were quite elderly) and visited the swamps where they had seen the birds. I also looked at more recent sightings, as much as possible with an unbiased eye. What happened later was something that I could never have imagined. (p. 27)

Gallagher discovers a small network of obsessive Ivory-bill freaks, who like UFO watchers, keep up to the minute web sites of where the latest possible sightings have occurred. In some cases it is very difficult to evaluate some of these people's sightings. Mary Scott, former corporate lawyer turned Ivory-bill fanatic, claims to have seen Ivory-bills in Louisiana and Arkansas. I am always leery about undocumented sightings from "true-believers" who have a lot of time and emotions invested in the presence of their quixotic quarry, but Tim gives her a very fair and unbiased treatment. I was reminded of the challenges that rare bird committees often face when evaluating reports of extreme rarities unsubstantiated with a photograph. Maybe they saw the bird, but the bottom line is that extraordinary sightings require extraordinary proof to enter the ornithological records. How can the standards be anything less? Ultimately, the bottom line for me is this: I have no idea whether she really saw the woodpeckers or not. But, should someone go out to those locations and check her reports? Absolutely, and that's what Gallagher does.

Tim also tracks down older post-Eckleberry sightings and gives the details of each alleged sighting. His take on many of these reports is that they were never given a fair and unbiased examination, and that the ornithological establishment dismissed the Ivory-bill sightings out of hand without much follow-up investigation. Most of these sightings occurred in a broad area around the greater Mississippi River basin from the Big Thicket in east Texas east to the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area on the border of Mississippi and Louisiana, and from the Atchafalaya Basin in south central Louisiana north to Bayou de View in Arkansas. Truth be told, over many decades, there are only a handful of reports of Ivory-bills to track down over this large area of riparian forests. Perhaps more sightings occurred, but people may have become shy about coming forth because they would be ridiculed. Then again, the possibility of a mistaken identification is ever present as Pileated Woodpeckers are very common in all these areas.

One of the most controversial sightings detailed in *The Grail Bird* revolves around the photos shown by George Lowery, Director of Louisiana State University's Museum of Natural Science, at the 1971 meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union. These photos were quickly dismissed as hoaxes; it was alleged that a museum specimen was nailed to a tree and photographed at a distance. Gallagher tracks down the person who actually took those photos, the larger-than-life, cigar-chomping Fielding Lewis, chairman of the Louisiana state boxing commission and a character right out of a Tennessee Williams play. After reading this chapter, I confess I was still

fairly skeptical about those photos, but it was an interesting and entertaining interview anyway.

Gallagher revisits some of the locations for these post-Eckleberry sightings, and in some cases he feels that there may just be enough suitable habitat to support some Ivory-billed Woodpeckers.

And then the book takes a sharp turn into the *Twilight Zone*, at least for Gallagher. Finding out that outdoorsman Gene Sparling had very recently reported seeing a possible Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Gallagher and “Ivory-bill chaser” Bobby Ray Harrison set out in canoes on February 2004 in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas to see whether they can see it for themselves. After a lot of searching, a life-changing event for Gallagher occurred:

And then it happened. Less than eighty feet away, a large black and white bird that had been flying towards us from a side channel of the bayou to the right came out into the sunshine and flew across the open stretch of water directly in front of us. It started to bank, giving us a superb view of its back and both wings for a moment as it pulled up, as if it were going to land on a tree trunk. “Look at all the white in the wings!” I yelled. Hearing my voice, it veered away from the tree and continued to fly to the left. We both cried out simultaneously, “Ivory-bill!” (p. 152)

But immediately after this sighting of a lifetime, Gallagher “reality-checks” himself. Are we sure we saw what we just think we saw? So he has both of them write down field notes. He of course realizes he has failed to get any photos of the bird, and that just one brief sighting does not constitute much proof at all. In increasingly foul weather he continues to hunt the bird with little success. So what do you do with such a sighting? He returns to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology looking like he has been in the muck and mud for a week, which he has. He tells the Director of the Lab, John Fitzpatrick, of his sighting and is naturally submitted to a rigorous grilling.

The decision was made to try to refind the bird or birds by sending down the Sapsuckers, Cornell’s team of crack birders, in mid-March. This included folks like Ken Rosenberg, Kevin McGowan, and Steve Kelling, all associated in some way with the Lab. They were sworn to secrecy. After days of searching and coming up blank, the first team left Arkansas and was replaced by another team also all from Cornell. This team was comprised of folks like Mindy LeBranche of the citizen science program, and Elliot Swartout and Melanie Driscoll of bird population studies. On Saturday, April 10, 2004, Mindy LeBranche had a brief sighting.

Mindy was suddenly aghast. As tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision. She slowly lowered her binoculars and sat there repeating over and over, “The trailing edge was white, the trailing edge was white, the trailing edge was white... This can’t be a Pileated.” (p. 215)

Eventually there were two other people who had similar, very brief encounters with what they believed to be an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. It is also hard to evaluate

these reports because they are so brief and are reported by folks who are certainly psyched to see this bird. We have all seen groups of birders in the throes of a tense search for a rarity (one nowhere near as coveted as an Ivory-bill) miscall all sorts of birds they briefly glimpse as “the” bird they are searching for. There are look-alike Pileateds all over this bayou and, as Gallagher writes, even a Wood Duck seen briefly and peripherally among all the trees can look like something interesting. The sun can also do strange things to black plumage in dappled light. Most importantly, there were still no photographs. But, finally, in September of 2004, Bobby Harrison manages to get some brief videotape of a bird flying away, and *The Grail Bird* quickly winds up after that.

In mid-June this year I had the pleasure to interview Tim Gallagher for my radio show. At that time he had just returned from Cache River, and the bird(s) still had not been seen since the videotape despite intensive searches, though some inconclusive but interesting sounds had been picked up on recording devices planted in the swamp. Apparently, unlike their garrulous cousins the Pileateds, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker does not call a lot when flying, and their distinctive *kent-kent* calls may not carry that far. By the time this review is printed, maybe additional sightings will be reported. Tim did point out that spring and summer were among the worst times to look because all the foliage of this thickly wooded bayou is out, making the chore of looking for something among all those trees extremely difficult. February and March seem to be the key months to search.

When I looked at the map on the Fish and Wildlife web site, it appeared that the sightings were grouped just a short distance on either side of the bridge on Highway 17. I asked if he thought the bird(s) were flying over the highway, Gallagher answered he did not know but that one of the sightings was indeed very close to that bridge.

Tim Gallagher had set out to write a book simply about those people who were convinced the Ivory-billed Woodpecker still existed and to follow up on some of their reports with some “on the scene” reporting. He had no idea he would become such an integral part of the story he was writing. Though he kept it from the publisher for a few months, he did in fact have to tell the publisher about his sighting BEFORE the public and scientific community found out, as I suspected. I do find that troubling.

The reason the story broke when it did, and rumors about this were true, is that someone high up in one of the organizations involved with Cache River area was found to have leaked the story despite pleas to keep it quiet. The cat was out of the bag, and the people involved had to come forward to the media. This is a shame because it was the hope of all the concerned parties that they would have had at least a year to get a handle on how many birds are there and what would be the best way to manage the Ivory-bills. It’s no surprise that birders have indeed shown up. One story tells of an eager group, dressed in full birding regalia complete with hip-waders, who determinedly waded out into this classic southern swamp just a very short distance, saw their first cottonmouth and then turned back. Eventually, Fish and Wildlife may erect some viewing towers above the canopy, which may actually offer better chances for seeing the bird than being down in the swamp among all the massive tree trunks.

Except for some restricted areas, hunting will be allowed per usual. Of course, all this may change when new information comes to light. When asked how many Ivory-bills he thinks still exist at Cache River, Gallagher diplomatically says he does not know. Does he believe other birds exist in other swamps? He will tell you it's a possibility, and that folks should be checking all areas where sightings have been reported before as well as areas like the Okefenokee in Georgia where birds have been known historically to exist. Personally, I find it difficult to believe a decent population of these birds is currently thriving in the scattered and widely separated swamplands that remain preserved. I hope I am wrong. Gallagher offers the thought that there may be more trees now in these areas than there were fifty years ago, when much of the bottomland forest was clear-cut. Perhaps. But are they the right species?

You may ask why, if these sightings have been rumored about for years, some hardcore birders have not previously found and documented the birds. After all, look at how many tiny secretive Black Rails have been spotted by birders every year. Yet not one birder till now has managed to see such a huge, boldly patterned bird with an enormous territory? The answer Gallagher feels is that most birders "don't get off the board walk." In other words, in order to get to those secluded areas where the Ivory-bills have been reported, you have to venture deep into snake- and bug-infested swamplands where typically a canoe or kayak is your only option, and even that mode of transportation can be challenging. Birders are not known to put in long hours over days of hard searching for a bird they are not even sure exists. Most of the people who have reported Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in the last few decades have been hunters and fishermen.

As a book, *The Grail Bird* is a good book, but not a great one. It lacks depth, perspective, and analysis. This is not surprising because obviously Gallagher had to rush to finish the book to get it out on time. Which is too bad for all of us. I hope Tim Gallagher keeps on this story because I think the really interesting book on the Ivory-bill is yet to be written. It's the book about what happens when a creature long believed to be extinct is rediscovered and what we *then* did in reaction to that unexpected event. We do not know the end of this story yet. Will we react sanely and thoughtfully or instead, typically? Will the Ivory-bill become a mere curiosity? Will it simply become the mega-tick of the birding community as obsessive hardcores jostle to briefly glimpse the few remaining birds? Will it become a symbol for more aggressive schemes of land and habitat preservation? Will it become a way to make money as locals certainly hope it will? Will it be the poster child for new fund-raising efforts for Cornell and The Nature Conservancy? Will science struggle mightily to preserve a tiny population of this magnificent bird in much the same way extraordinary efforts and money has been spent on trying to save and reestablish the California Condor? To what end?

At some point you have to ask the question: what are we saving and why? Would all that time and effort be put to better use preserving large tracts of other habitats, perhaps saving birds and other creatures before they get to the critical situation the Ivory-bill finds itself in now? Or, maybe this whole story will end with an unsatisfying whimper as just a few scattered sightings will be reported over the next

few years and then, slowly, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker will once again fade from our lives like the now popular Ivory-bill T-shirts. If we finally were to find out there are only a few or even just a single bird left, will we be able to leave those birds alone to live out their lives and meet inevitable extinction with some natural sense of grace, or will we relentlessly hound those few birds to a hastened end? All of this will ultimately show us what extinction of another species really means to our culture. Personally, I am fascinated by why we natural historians become so wildly emotional over the rediscovery of a creature previously thought to be extinct. And I am including myself in this phenomenon because my heart certainly skipped a beat (or several) when I heard the news. Does it have to do with our inability to accept death and our need to always be holding out hope for a second chance? Or is the myth of a miraculous “resurrection” ingrained in our cultural imagination on many levels?

Coincidentally, when the announcement about the rediscovery of the Ivory-bill was made, I was reading Megan Kate Nelson’s very insightful *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee Swamp*. The Okefenokee was an important former haunt of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Nelson talks about swamplands being interesting, complex, and amorphous lands that various peoples like Native Americans, slaves, loggers, industrialists, white “Swampers,” and eventually preservationists projected their desires onto. That vast swampland in Georgia became a mirror of the needs and wants of societies through history. People saw in the swamplands what they wanted to see and acted accordingly. It seems that the Bayou de View is becoming another mirror of our times. That next book about the Ivory-billed Woodpecker should be as much about us as the woodpecker. After all, the woodpecker was perfectly fine until we came along.

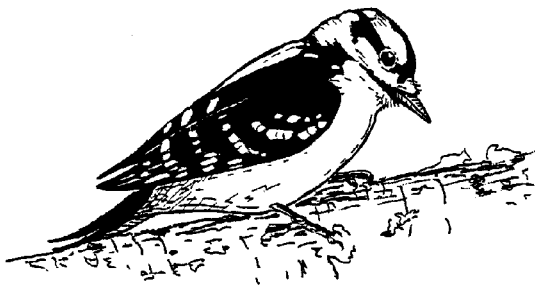
I am I plus my surroundings and if I do not preserve the latter, I do not  
preserve myself.

Jose Ortega y Gasset

### Other Literature Cited:



- Hoose, P. 2004. *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.  
Nelson, M.K. 2005. *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.



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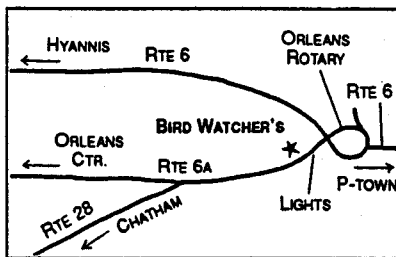
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