Florida Field Naturalist 36(1):5-7, 2008.

REVIEW

Ivorybill Hunters—The Search for Proof in a Flooded Wilderness. Geoffrey E. Hill. 2007. Oxford University Press, ISBN13: 978-0-19-532346-7. 272 pp. $24.95 cloth.

Ivorybill Hunters by ornithologist Geoffrey Hill is the latest in a suite of books on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker appearing in the past three years, including Jerome Jackson's *In Search of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker* (Smithsonian Books, 2004), Tim Gallagher's *The Grail Bird (*Houghton Mifflin, 2005), and Phillip Hoose's young-adult title, *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004). With all the attention given the Cornell Lab's discovery of the species in eastern Arkansas in 2005, Hill's discovery of ivorybills in Florida is like the second child, slipping by with almost no fuss or notice. Yet his book is perhaps the most illuminating of the four, and certainly offers the most compelling evidence for the persistence of the species.

Geoff Hill—best known for his work on plumage evolution, particularly on carotenoid pigmentation in House Finches—is a faculty member at Auburn University in Alabama. As the obligate bird authority on campus, his is the unenviable position of receiver of oddball bird inquiries from the public . . . including a call in 1995 from a hunter who believes he has seen an ivorybill on Alabama's Pea River. "Look Doc," says the caller: "I hunt all the time and I damn well know what a pileated looks like . . . this weren't no pileated. It was an ivorybill."

Hill files the call away for long-term storage, and like the rest of the world, he is stunned in 2005 at the news that ivorybills have been detected along Arkansas' Cache River. Inspired, he decides to visit the Pea River to look for ivorybills with his very capable lab technicians in May 2005. They find nothing, but close by, in the Florida Panhandle's Choctawhatchee, they enter what looks like classic ivorybill habitat—flooded swamp with large, old cypress. They hear loud hammering, glimpse a very large black bird trailing white on the wings, find extremely large tree cavities, and see scaled bark—sections of trees showing empty bore holes from beetle larvae, where thick bark is chiseled away. Soon, Hill hears a double knock—the diagnostic *BAM-bam* sound, which, along with the *kent* call, is characteristic of ivorybills.

In retrospect, Hill is perplexed, as the reader will be, as to why the Choctawhatchee was never searched for the species. It takes up almost 40,000 acres of swamp forest, not including tributaries; it is publicly-owned by the Northwest Florida Water Management District, has been uncut for perhaps eighty years, and was only selectively logged before then. Follow-up sightings of birds and sign early-on make Hill and his crew virtually certain that ivorybills inhabit the swamp. Wary of the attention and controversy surrounding the Arkansas sightings, Hill and crew decide to remain silent, for the time being, to gather better confirmatory evidence before going public.

Hill's thoughts about how this single local population of ivorybills could have been missed provide good perspective as to how the species' apparent persistence could have gone unrecognized generally for over half a century. Isolated rural hunters and fishermen, with little access to or use for academic contacts, may not even have been aware that the birds were rare. Birders neglected the Choctawhatchee. The phrase that one sometimes hears about phantom bird species—"if they were out there, all the birders would have found them by now"—suggests that legions of bird watchers have been combing swamps for ivorybills for decades, but falls compellingly flat under Hill's dissection: "Birders in North America spend almost zero time in wilderness . . . they never leave roads or graveled trails . . . give the birder the garbage dump, the sewage pond, the breakwater of a marina." Anyone who has ever participated in a Christmas Bird

Count can attest that what Hill says here is true. Even deliberate searches for ivorybills seem to have fallen short; Hill comments that Jerome Jackson's searches never mention "so much as a day's float down the Escambia, Yellow, Conecuh, Shoal, or Choctawhatchee Rivers," and further that just floating the river is "not a legitimate search. Days must be spent deep in the swamp forest away from the river channel before any reasonable assessment of the presence of ivorybills can be made."

In addition to insufficient searching, Hill points out that assumptions about habitat use based on James Tanner's work may have biased searchers' hopes about ever finding ivorybills. Tanner, who studied the last known population of ivorybills at the infamous Singer Tract in the 1930s, based his assessment about ivorybill habitat on very low densities of birds using extensive areas of virgin timber. While doubtlessly true that the species needs a reliable abundance of decaying trees with beetle grubs, evidence from Hill's book and from claimed sightings in the past 50 years—Texas' Big Thicket and others—suggests that ivorybills may be more flexible in habitat use and vagile in site movement than previously thought. With possible sightings in the past 50 years in Louisiana, Arkansas, Georgia, Texas, and Florida, and large reserves such as Okefenokee and Big Cypress starting to ripen, there may be possibilities for the ivorybill yet.

Hill also is not afraid to take to task the idea that "science"—a term much bandied about in exchanges over the 2005 Arkansas ivorybill sightings—is somehow involved with searching for the birds:

> Science is the process of explaining natural phenomena through deductive reasoning . . . when we hunt for ivorybills . . . whether we are distinguished professors or blue-collar laborers . . . we are not doing science. We are searching for a bird. We are birding.
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> Is it possible to make an ivorybill search scientific? No. But what if we use really fancy and complicated equipment? Still no. If a population of ivorybills is discovered, then conservation and population biologists can use science to understand habitat use and other aspects of the bird.

Hills' book, and Tim Gallagher's, about the Arkansas discoveries, both present a similar picture—enough *kent* calls, double knocks, bark scalings and large cavities to provide tantalizing evidence, but in such challenging circumstances as to yield frustratingly fleeting views of the actual birds. Birds always seem to fly before detailed pictures or videos can be obtained. Both Hill and Gallagher make the case that this wariness is likely why the bird has survived up to now—unlike the Singer Tract birds, which mobbed Tanner and his wife as they photographed them at the nest, the remaining ivorybills carry the genes of individuals who survived the turn of the century onslaught precisely because they were wary.

Of the four books about Ivory-billed Woodpeckers mentioned at the top of this review, Tim Gallagher's *The Grail Bird* is written in a style that will be most accessible to the general non-ornithological public. Gallagher, an author and editor, participated in the Arkansas searches, and writes comfortably in a contemporary, reader-friendly manner. Jerome Jackson's historic account, with numbered citations, has the most studious tone of the books, while Hoose's *Race to Save the Lord God Bird* is a beautifully produced tome that is sure to draw in budding 12-year old naturalists. Hill's popular writing, while reader-friendly and interspersed with dialogue, lacks the casual approach that Gallagher executes so effortlessly, but his story is easily the most exciting of the four. As the search by Hill and crew mounts, you will find the book hard to put down—and if you're like me, you will find it hard to continue to doubt the Ivory-billed Woodpeckers' existence. Hill's credentials as a scientist having no vested interest or previous background with ivorybills put him in good stead here; unassuming presentation, an even-

handed tone, and a preponderance of very compelling evidence make for a good and convincing read.

As Gallagher points out in *The Grail Bird*, harm may have come to any remaining ivorybills because people discounted reports of sightings after the disappearance of the Singer Tract, and hence did not take steps to preserve additional southern swamp forest. The good news is that, if ivorybills do exist, it seems only a matter of time before someone, somewhere finds a "smoking gun," such as an ivorybill filmed at an active nest where the field marks are indisputable. In the meantime, information about Hill's ongoing search can be found at: http://www.auburn.edu/academic/science_math/cosam/departments/biology/faculty/webpages/hill/ivorybill/Updates.html.

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