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## Alive and pecking?

**Ivory-billed woodpecker was believed extinct, but Canadian-U.S. team hopes to get photographic evidence it still lives**

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[PETER CALAMAI](#)

SCIENCE WRITER

Ivory-billed woodpeckers, believed extinct until recently, have been seen 14 separate times since May last year along a remote Florida panhandle river, a team of Canadian and U.S. bird researchers have announced.

One American researcher spotted two of the huge woodpeckers at the same time, strongly suggesting that a breeding population of Ivory-bills has managed to survive on the Choctawhatchee River even if wiped out elsewhere across North America and in Cuba.

Struggling on a shoestring budget and battling alligators and water moccasin snakes, the team also recorded hundreds of distinctive vocal calls and rapping used by the woodpeckers to communicate, found a score of recent tree-nesting cavities of the right size and identified dozens of the bird's unique chisel marks on bark.

"I think they're all up and down the river," said University of Windsor professor Dan Mennill, a 32-year-old biologist specializing in bird sounds and team co-leader.

Yet despite visiting the area regularly since last May and camping out there continuously for almost six months, the researchers from Windsor and from Auburn University in Alabama failed to photograph the magnificent bird.

The Ivory-billed woodpecker is not difficult for experienced birders to identify. Bigger than a crow, it is flamboyantly marked with a red crest, yellow eyes, a gleaming white bill and white feathers at the trailing edge of the wings.



ARTHUR A. ALLEN/CORNELL/REUTERS

Many people believe the huge Ivory-billed woodpecker, pictured in Louisiana in this 1935 colorized image, is back from extinction.

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### Lost and found

*Some animals once thought to be extinct that have been rediscovered:*

**Northern bald ibis** rediscovered in Syria in 2002.

**Giant Palouse earthworm**, last seen in 1987, rediscovered 2006. Found along the Washington-Idaho border.

**Laotian rock rat**, believed extinct for 11 million years, first seen by a western scientist in 2005.

**Chinese crested tern**, thought extinct from 1937 to 2000.

"We need the kind of photograph that will convince people who are skeptical," said Mennill, who didn't see the bird himself during an eight-day visit to the area.

He explained that the team members paddling along the Choctawhatchee instinctively grabbed for binoculars rather than cameras when they spotted a likely bird.

The head of natural history at the Royal Ontario Museum, bird researcher Allan Baker, agreed that a photograph of the woodpecker is essential to remove all doubt.

"It would be great news. There's always a chance that you'll find a species thought to be extinct if you search difficult habitats that people haven't checked out thoroughly," he said.

In December, the Windsor-Auburn team plans a major expedition to nail the identification, by training automatic cameras at promising tree cavities, carrying high-quality video gear, using remote listening posts to quickly find Ivory-bill hot spots and dispatching as many as 20 field investigators instead of the lonely two students who camped there this past winter and spring.

"All those excuses will be gone," said Geoffrey Hill, the Auburn University ornithologist and bird feather expert who launched the search in May 2005.

An experienced birder as well as a respected researcher, Hill was involved in two of the 14 sightings. Researchers from Auburn accounted for the other 12, sharing one with a Windsor graduate student Kyle Swiston.

"Each of us could have shot an Ivory-billed by now because we had time to raise a shotgun. But video cameras are really hard to point compared to binoculars and shotguns," Hill said in an interview.

Many ornithologists and bird-watchers remain skeptical about the woodpecker's survival despite a few seconds of blurry video of a large bird with white wing markings recorded on Arkansas's Cache River in 2004 and made public last year. Even though flocks of birders later descended on the area, no one claimed to have spotted an Ivory-billed afterwards.

Retired Toronto lawyer Peter Gilchrist was among the birders who trekked to Arkansas, spending five days there last November in a fruitless search for ivory-bills. Asked if he would go to the Florida panhandle,

**Slater's skink**, a type of lizard, rediscovered in 2004 in Australia.

**Coelacanth**, thought extinct for 80 million years, first seen in 1938 off South Africa.

**Black-footed ferret**, believed extinct by 1978, rediscovered 1981 in Wyoming.

**New Zealand storm petrel**, last seen in 19th century, rediscovered in 2003.

**Long-legged warbler**, last seen in 1894, rediscovered in Fiji in 2003.

**Rusty-throated wren-babbler**, not seen for 60 years, rediscovered in the Himalayas in 2004.

**Takahe**, a bird believed extinct for 50 years, rediscovered in 1948 in New Zealand.

**North Pacific right whale**, thought extinct until the mid-'90s. Lives in the waters around Alaska.

**High Range dwarf cattle**, rediscovered in India in 2004.

**Asian grey whale**, believed extinct since the turn of the century, rediscovered in 1973 near Russia's far east coast.

**White-winged guan**, believed extinct for 100 years, rediscovered in 1977 in Peru.

**Southern white rhino**, thought extinct throughout 19th century, rediscovered in South Africa in 1895.

Compiled by Rick Sznajder  
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Gilchrist instantly replied: "Absolutely. I was even thinking of going this week. It's the grail for birders, possibly come back from the dead on our doorstep."

The scientists are calling upon amateur bird watchers for help in searching other promising river basins in the panhandle, the portion of Florida that sticks out westward along the Gulf of Mexico south of Georgia and Alabama. The Escambia, Yellow and Apalachicola rivers all include forested sections that regularly flood, creating the Ivory-billed's preferred habitat.

But Mennill and Hill both pleaded with birders to avoid their main research area, a 1,500-hectare swath along the Choctawhatchee River, north of the panhandle town of Bruce. The exact location is being kept secret by agreement with a state water agency that owns much of the area.

Especially worrisome would be an invasion of so-called "twitchers," sometimes fanatical birders armed with high-power spotting scopes who play back recordings to entice rare birds to appear.

"These birds could be driven out of the area if we attracted that kind of birder. We're pleading with them to put conservation first," said Mennill.

Hill emphasized that seeking birds in the Choctawhatchee basin is not for the faint-hearted. Even when the weather is too cold for the resident alligators and aggressive water moccasins, rudimentary river landings and the lack of any trails make penetrating the area a challenge.

"I think birders will come to say that they were in the Choctawhatchee and for the social event of sitting around with other birders. But once they get a taste of what it's like to get into the forest, they'll decide it's too hard," he said.

More details at <http://www.uwindsor.ca/ivorybill>

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