

Looking for the Lord-God Bird in the Okefenokee

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Have you ever tried looking for a needle in a haystack? That phrase accurately captures our recent attempts to search the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) for the ultra-rare Ivory-bill Woodpecker. Since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the rediscovery of this once-thought extinct woodpecker in Arkansas, public interest has skyrocketed. One of the mandates enacted for the recovery of the Ivory-bill Woodpecker is to attempt to locate other populations of this elusive bird. In late 2005 and early 2006, searches for other possible population centers were initiated and one of the areas selected was our very own Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

For centuries the Ivory-bill Woodpecker, dubbed the *Lord-God Bird* by John James Audubon, inhabited the dense forests and swamps of the southeastern U.S., including southeastern Georgia. The Okefenokee Swamp was home to the Ivory-bill Woodpecker, with the earliest reported sighting occurring in 1860; however, sightings since then were sporadic, with confirmed observations rarer still. By 1936, many of the mature forests of red-gum, water oak, and black gum-bay, which were the principle habitat for the Ivory-bill Woodpecker in and around the swamp, had been cut for timber. The last confirmed sighting of an Ivory-bill in the Okefenokee occurred in 1942, when then Refuge Biologist Hayden Carter and his wife Margaret, observed one at close range near Minnie's Island. By 1963, no more sightings had occurred, prompting Refuge Biologist Eugene Cypert to conclude that years of extensive logging had led to the Ivory-

bill Woodpecker's decline. He further speculated that the rare birds were no longer present in the refuge.

Since the 1930's, the logged areas within the swamp have had time to heal and many of the sweet gum, bay, and water oak stands have matured. In 2005, it was determined that the northwest boundary of the swamp might support a small population of Ivory-bill Woodpeckers, and since the swamp had a history of Ivory-bill Woodpecker activity, it was speculated that perhaps, just perhaps, a few of the birds may have continued to live undetected there.

In 2006, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources conducted joint surveys of almost 80,000 acres in the Okefenokee NWR. The survey was conducted over a period of two months, beginning in early April 2006, and included areas where Ivory-bill Woodpecker sightings had occurred in the past, including Minnies Island, Cravens Hammock, Hickory Hammock, Pine Island, and the hardwood wetlands located in the extreme western boundary of the refuge. Researchers accessed these areas by canoe, foot, and, in some instances, helicopter. Once in, the researchers evaluated the habitat type, and searched for possible signs of Ivory-bill Woodpecker activity, including specific foraging marks on trees, nest cavity sites, and/or auditory signs, such as the Ivory-bill's distinct "double-knock," made when the bird is foraging in trees. They used tapes of Ivory-bill calls that were recorded in Louisiana in the 1930's in an attempt to elicit a response, but, sadly, these went unanswered. None of the sites surveyed yielded signs of the Ivory-bill Woodpecker, forcing us to reconsider Cypert's 1963 conclusions about the Ivory-bill Woodpecker's being extinct in the Okefenokee.

Yet all is not lost. The researchers did note favorable habitat throughout most of the areas surveyed. The forest has grown back and it has matured, so who knows, perhaps one day the Lord-God Bird may return to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.