Ivory-billed Woodpecker Search Summary for 2007
– Elusive Bird Spotted But Not Confirmed this Year –

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker was not confirmed this year with a clear photograph or video, but this year’s effort did lead to additional credible sightings. The lack of hard evidence this year is frustrating to conservationists with the federal and state agencies as well as volunteer searchers seeking to recover this endangered species.

Searchers and experts from around the Southeast Region gathered at an Ivory-billed Woodpecker symposium held in Atlanta, July 11-12, 2007, to share their findings and help plan future search efforts. Representatives from each of the searches provided a review of their findings for the search efforts conducted in 2007. Organized searches occurred in Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

“I greatly appreciate the dedication of the searchers who donated their time to gather additional information about the Ivory-billed Woodpecker,” said Laurie Fenwood, Ivory-billed Woodpecker coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “I wish we could have gotten an 8 by 10 glossy photograph of an ivorybill this year, but we didn’t.”

She went on to say additional searches are expected to continue through next year. The draft recovery plan for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker has been approved and was released for public comment August 22, 2007.

Searchers dedicated thousands of hours hiking, kayaking and canoeing in the swampy bottomland hardwood forests and scouting upland areas to find evidence of the bird in several Southeastern states. The searchers covered miles of transects (fixed paths within a designated area to systematically search an area and obtain an estimate of area covered) or canoed rivers and creeks using Global Positioning System and binoculars, video and digital still cameras. They also placed Autonomous Recording Units (weatherproof high tech audio recorders) and self-contained photo surveillance units to monitor cavities in trees and potential feeding sites. Thousands of hours of audio recordings and millions of photographic images have been reviewed for compelling evidence of the ivorybill - some by computer programs and some with the good old-fashioned technology of human eyes and ears.

Some interesting high tech tools helped guide this year’s search efforts.

In June-July of 2006, NASA used the Laser Vegetation Imaging Sensor (LVIS) to map approximately 5,000 square kilometers at the White River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas, including sites where recent possible sightings of the bird occurred. The LVIS-generated data of the 3-D vegetation structure and underlying terrain was used as a means to guide local, ground-based search efforts in the 2006-2007 field season, as well as identify the remaining areas of habitat suitable for protection should the bird be found. For more information, visit: http://www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/news/topstory/2006/woodpecker.html

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology fielded a new mobile search team of four biologists who traveled to South Carolina, Florida, Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. These skilled biologists supported
searches led by the states or other organizations, and examined potentially interesting habitat. Though
the mobile search team had no definitive ivorybill sightings, they investigated potential evidence in
several states that provides substantial justification for search efforts to continue in the near future.

“We are encouraged by the good habitat we have found,” said Martjan Lammertink, leader of the
mobile team. “I’d like spend more time in the Atchafalaya basin, in the Pascagoula in Mississippi,
parts of South Carolina, and in the Escambia, Apalachicola, and other rivers of the Florida Panhandle.”

Cornell also provided advice on search strategies, loaned equipment, and protocols for the next year’s
suite of regional searches.

Here is a search summary, by state:

Arkansas:
Wattensaw Wildlife Management Area, White River NWR & Cache River NWR: Five full-time
staff and 57 expert volunteers searched many areas of high-quality habitat in Arkansas that had not
been searched well, or searched at all, during previous field seasons. Reonyx (remote) cameras
mounted on trees snapped digital images every few seconds of possible roost sites or feeding areas.
Their images were then shipped to Cornell for interpretation. In addition, University of California,
Berkeley, and Texas A & M University provided an experimental new robotic camera system that uses
light and motion to recognize and record passing birds. This system showed great promise in
capturing flying birds, a notoriously difficult challenge due to their small size and fast movement.

David Luneau from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and a group of trained volunteers
reviewed well over a million images from the Reonyx cameras and many thousands more from the
robotic camera. The remote Reonyx cameras captured Pileated Woodpeckers foraging and ducking
into tree cavities. The robotic camera picked up hawks and woodpeckers and will be used again next
year in Arkansas.

“We’ll return to Arkansas for at least another field season,” said Ron Rohrbaugh, director of the
Cornel Lab of Ornithology's Ivory-billed Woodpecker Research Project. “Searches there and searches
conducted by other agencies throughout the Southeast are still turning up reports of sounds that cannot
be explained away. However, there’s no way to know for sure yet if reported double knocks and kent-
like sounds were made by an ivory-bill or something else.”

Rohrbaugh, says more survey work is needed in the vast White River area, as well as the Wattensaw
Wildlife Management Area. This year a hunter in Wattensaw reported watching a bird for many
minutes that he later described as an Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

“The search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas in 2006 and 2007 was another season of
easy cooperation between the members of the Big Woods Conservation Partnership,” said Allan
Mueller, avian conservation project manager for The Nature Conservancy in Arkansas. “While we did
not come up with the ‘iron-clad’ evidence, we did discover new promising locations to search and
again produced tantalizing evidence of this great bird's continuing presence."

Arkansas participants included: The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arkansas
Game and Fish Commission, U.S. Forest Service, Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, Audubon
Arkansas, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (CLO) including 5 Full-time CLO employees, two
funded by Audubon Arkansas and one funded by The Nature Conservancy. The 57 volunteers visited
for two-week stints between December and one funded by The Nature Conservancy. The 57 volunteers visited
for two-week stints between December and April. Results: Three sightings: Two at Wattensaw
Wildlife Management Area, One at Upper Bayou de View. Autonomous Recording Units detected three double knocks and one Kent call (group review).

**Florida:**

Apalachicola/Chipola River Basins Search January through May 2007: The cooperators searched for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (Campephilus principalis) in the Apalachicola and Chipola river basins from January through early June 2007 using volunteers. The search followed protocols established by R. Cooper and colleagues at the University of Georgia (Cooper et al., unpublished manuscript) for randomly selecting search patches and collecting vegetation data. Searchers covered 23 2-km² search patches during an effort of approximately 820 hours in the field using 33 volunteers. We had no visual or audio detections of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. Search information and vegetation data were sent to the University of Georgia for analysis in a habitat occupancy model.

Choctawhatchee River: Auburn University supported two camps of six technicians and additional volunteers to cover 780 transects of 500 meters in the Choctawhatchee River area. There were seven total sightings. Listening Stations and cameras were deployed, and approximately 3,000 cavities were inventoried. Searchers heard 30 double knocks and 17 calls that might have been made by the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Roughly 35,000 hours of recordings were analyzed for interesting sounds, recording many reputed double knocks and Kent calls.

**South Carolina:**

South Carolina Ivory-billed Woodpecker Working Group: The 2007 search effort in Congaree National Park, South Carolina, included 42 participants who spent over 4,235 hours surveying for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers within the state. This work was supported by the South Carolina Ivory-billed Woodpecker Working Group, which includes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, Atlantic Coast Joint Venture, the USDA Forest Service, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, and The Nature Conservancy. The Old-Growth Bottomland Forest Research and Education Center at Congaree National Park provided housing and logistic support while searches were conducted within the park. Several areas were searched within South Carolina beginning in December and ending in May 2007. Over 1.3 million remote camera images were taken, and 13 Autonomous Recording Units (ARU) were deployed in several areas within South Carolina resulting in over 1,600 hours of recording time. Analysis of all data did not provide irrefutable evidence of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker existence, although Kent-like calls, double knocks and unconfirmed sightings within South Carolina suggest more effort within the state is justified.

**Tennessee:**

West Tennessee National Wildlife Refuges and Shelby Forest Wildlife Management Area: A small scale search included portions of West Tennessee National Wildlife Refuges, including Lower Hatchie and Chickasaw NWR. In total, 61 days were devoted to field searches – 46 days were spent surveying using standard transect protocols and 15 days were spent using stationary observation techniques within the Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge. During the 2007 search season in Tennessee, a total of 3,560 acres of public lands were surveyed with the transect protocols (2,010 acres at Chickasaw NWR and 1,550 acres at Lower Hatchie NWR). Significant results of this work included a potential double knock and three loud single raps heard in January on two separate occasions.

Hatchie River: Searchers heard a few double knocks and observed some interesting cavities.

**Lower Hatchie and Chickasaw NWR:** Searchers heard a few double knocks and observed interesting feeding sign.
Shelby Forest Wildlife Management Area: No Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were clearly seen or heard. One interesting single rap was heard (single raps are not known to be made by Pileated Woodpeckers). No high quality cavities found at Shelby, with surprisingly few cavities in general in most places. No Ivory-billed Woodpecker sounds were recorded on Autonomous Recording Units. Habitat is available at all sites and Ivory-billed Woodpeckers could occur potentially using the area as transients.

Texas:
Big Thicket:
Searching, led by the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, took place in the Big Thicket National Preserve in the following Units: Jack Gore Baygall, Neches Bottoms, Beaumont, Village Creek Corridor, Neches Corridor, and Turkey Creek. Full-scale surveys began in December, and the weather drastically changed field conditions during the project. Frequent heavy rain events raised water levels in the search areas, twice to over flood stage. Although these conditions made access to certain patches difficult and time consuming, in general the high water greatly facilitated moving about, allowing kayaks to pass over much of the tangle of downed timber caused by Hurricane Rita in late September, 2005. A tremendous amount of support and cooperation was received from the Big Thicket National Preserve in the form of access to digital satellite imagery and equipment loans. The Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge greatly aided efforts with the loan of a pickup truck and Dow Chemical and Bill Galloway provided boats for use in the effort. Trinity River NWR and the adjacent Wallisville Lake Project were also searched. While the habitat in several of these areas was promising, much of the land there is in private hands restricting search efforts. Results: No definitive sightings were made.

Louisiana: The group tested helicopter search techniques with radio telemetry equipped Pileated Woodpeckers. Observers were able to see the birds flush from a known location. This experiment provides support for additional effort with helicopters, aimed at locating and photographing an ivorybill. Additional search efforts will start this coming fall and winter.

What about the future?
The Service and its partners will continue searching for the ivory bill in 2007 and 2008. Biologists are convinced the bird exists in the Southeast and given the tantalizing findings to date and the size of the territory being searched, the need to document the birds’ location and habitat in order to learn more about the woodpecker is great and what is learned will assist in its recovery.

“Our effort to find more evidence needs to continue.” Fenwood, the Service’s recovery coordinator, added. “We have some good ideas and valuable lessons learned from our efforts so far.”

Fenwood said funding for the future is unknown at this time, but she is hopeful that funds will be available for additional search efforts at approximately the same level as last year.

“It is imperative we continue with searches for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker,” said Chuck Hunter, regional refuge biologist for the Service’s Southeast Region. “Enough credible evidence continues to come to our attention that leads us to believe several isolated pairs or very small populations still exist.”

As a result of the meeting three approaches evolved to help refine the search next year. First, use smaller professional groups to examine the best habitat areas and rapidly respond to sighting information. Second, establish and use a citizen-science approach to improve public involvement by helping focus the energy of the public to help document the birds’ existence. Third, use aerial surveys with helicopters to identify Ivory-billed Woodpeckers from the air. This will guide ground teams
deployed to locate the bird for further observation and documentation. These ideas were selected in response to lessons learned from this and past years’ search efforts and offer new approaches to this extremely difficult challenge.


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