

Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge: The Singer Tract and the “Last Stand” for the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

In the early 1900s, conservationists warned of the impending extinction of the Ivory-billed woodpecker. The bird, whose historical range stretched from South Carolina to Florida and west into Texas, was rarely seen by ornithologists. In Louisiana, there were rumors of a sizeable population along the Tensas River. These rumors proved true when a Louisiana state legislator shot one in 1932. Word spread that the Ivory-billed woodpecker was holding on at an 80,000 acre tract along the Tensas River owned by the Singer Sewing Machine Company. This discovery gave ornithologists hope that if the Singer Tract could be protected, the species might survive.

James Tanner

From 1937 to 1939, James Tanner, a young doctoral student at Cornell University, researched the Ivory-billed woodpeckers of the Singer Tract. Based on his findings, Tanner wrote the definitive book on Ivory-billed woodpeckers.



The same year Tanner began his research, the Singer Company sold logging rights on their property to the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company. In

1938, logging began. Tanner, who believed that logging and the Ivory-billed could co-exist, outlined a land management plan for the Singer Tract that would reserve some areas, selectively cut others, and clear cut others. He provided this plan to Chicago Mill, who ignored his recommendations.

During his years at the Singer Tract, Tanner saw the population decline to only six birds remaining. He attributed this decline primarily to loss of food and loss of habitat. During a 1941 visit to the Singer Tract, he noted that the property was being heavily logged, and that it would be the end of the Ivory-billed woodpecker there.

The Fight to Save the Singer Woodpeckers

Tanner wasn't the only one hoping to save the population of Ivory-billed woodpeckers at Singer. John Baker, president of the Audubon Society, appealed to President Franklin Roosevelt, who directed the Secretary of Interior to consider how to save the land. Baker secured a \$200,000 pledge from Louisiana Governor Sam Jones to purchase the property. Jones, along with the governors of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, wrote to Chicago Mill asking them to spare the bird. In 1943 Baker, the refuge director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Louisiana's conservation commissioner met with the chairman of the board of Chicago Mill, but the company refused to deal. Baker failed in his attempts to get the Louisiana governor and the U.S. Congress to act to condemn the land.

The Last Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

Running out of options, Baker sent Audubon staff (and later president of The Nature Conservancy) Richard Pough to the Singer Tract in December, 1943 to search for another bird and hopefully nearby land that might be suitable habitat for the birds. In January, 1944, Pough saw the last Ivory-bill at a place on the Singer tract called John's Bayou. Pough warned that this place could be logged any day. Upon hearing that news, wildlife artist Don

Eckelberry raced down to John's Bayou, where he spent two weeks following and painting the bird. Eckelberry also saw the logging that cut down the trees used by the last Ivory-billed woodpecker. Prior to the 2004 discovery of the Ivory-billed woodpecker at Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas, this was the last authenticated sighting of the bird in the U.S.



Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge

Almost 40 years after the last Ivory-billed woodpecker was seen, Tensas River NWR was established on land that encompassed much of the Ivory-billed woodpecker's former land. (who sold it to us?). The refuge today encompasses xxxx acres. Xxx of these acres are bottomland hardwood swamp (is there anything still old that wasn't logged?). Much of the land has been reforested. The Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the Trust for Public Land, Entergy Corporation, and other partners to acquire an additional 11,000 acres and reforest 8,600 acres. One day, under the permanent protection of the refuge, this land will hopefully again provide the right kind of habitat for the Ivory-billed woodpecker.

Much of the information in this fact sheet comes from “Hope Is The Thing With Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds” by Christopher Cokinios

