

# Ivory-billed Woodpecker Accomplishments Report 2008

## History

On February 11, 2004, kayaker Gene Sparling caught a glimpse of a large woodpecker in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge of Arkansas. The encounter spurred an extensive scientific search for additional evidence that a species that many feared extinct was still living. The 2004 video captured by David Luneau presents compelling evidence, but remains controversial and debated in ornithological circles. Additional brief sightings from a region-wide search effort have indicated that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker may still exist in several areas in the Southeastern United States.

Under the leadership of the Secretary of Interior, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and numerous partners launched an ambitious recovery program to bring the Ivory-bill back from the brink of extinction. It was our responsibility to act upon the evidence, given the possibility of saving this iconic species.

## Introduction

Current conservation efforts have focused primarily on learning more about the status of the species, distribution and condition of habitat, as well as finalizing the Recovery Plan. Restoration of bottomland hardwood habitats on public and private land and National Wildlife Refuge land acquisitions were completed as part of existing program direction. As additional information is gained concerning the location and biology of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the Fish and Wildlife Service will focus on bottomland habitat restoration, basic research efforts, analysis tools, and development of protective measures.

## Recovery Funds (1113)

### *Recovery Plan, Team*

The Recovery Team Executive Committee, Biology and Habitat Working Groups, and the Steering Committee collaborated on a first draft of the Recovery Plan. This required cooperation of about 70 members. The Draft was published and public comment received. The peer review process was managed, under contract, by The Wildlife Society. The Recovery Team met in September 2008 to agree on a final draft plan to be submitted for approval in early 2009.

Communication, coordination, and collaboration are all key to this conservation effort. Biologists, foresters, managers, and administrators have contributed to these efforts. In 2008, \$286,250 was obligated for staff support of recovery planning efforts (attachment 1).

## Search Teams

It has been critically important to learn where birds may be located and develop a clearer idea of the bird's status. Our partnerships with State resource agencies, conservation groups, and others have made three years of region-wide searches possible. Focusing on bottomland hardwood ecosystems within the species historical range, these groups have covered a lot of ground under difficult conditions.

### *Arkansas*

The search team employed six full time members. The crew imitated double knocks, deployed cameras, walked transects, and did stationary watches. Bayou DeView (Cache River National Wildlife Refuge) and the White River National Wildlife Refuge were surveyed. This effort totaled 852 hours of stationary watches and 31,521 acres of visits. No responses to the double knocks were noted and no sightings were made by team members. On 1/27/2008 three sets of double knock sounds were heard on the White River National Wildlife Refuge.

Six days of Helicopter Surveys in these same areas were completed in cooperation with the Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. These flights covered approximately 152,877 acres. No Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were photographed. Woodpecker flush rates were very low in comparison with known numbers. This leads to the conclusion that, though the birds sighted during the flights could be readily identified and photographed, it is likely an ineffective method for documenting an ivorybill.

### *Florida*

The Auburn University search continued on the Choctawhatchee River. Search effort totaled 895 hours (149 search days). During this season three sightings that the group considers credible were reported. All activity (earlier video, double knock recordings, sound detections, and sightings) occurred in clusters with respect to time and location.

### *South Carolina*

Search effort concentrated on the Pee Dee River, Santee River, and Congaree National Park. A team of four people spent 1922 hours searching with an additional 1212 hours from volunteers. Twenty potential encounters, which included potential double knocks, kent calls, and brief sightings were noted.

### *Tennessee*

Forested areas in western Tennessee were surveyed, including several state-managed areas and National Wildlife Refuges. Double knock sounds, kent calls, and brief encounters continue to make this area a target for further search effort.

### *Texas*

Surveys were conducted in the Big Thicket National Preserve and along the Trinity River. Conditions were very difficult due to hurricane damage. These surveys will be concluded in March 2009. One brief visual encounter was noted, but no subsequent ones.

### *Louisiana*

Three sites in the Atchafalaya Basin and the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area were surveyed by helicopter. Approximately 646 miles of transects were completed in the period of January 28-February 1, 2008. No Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were sighted or photographed. Opportunity for use of helicopters is limited by time, funding, and availability. Large numbers of other species of woodpeckers flushed, and were easily identified in the canopy cover.

### *North Carolina*

The Lumber and Waccamaw Rivers were searched from January through June 2008. Sites were chosen to follow up on public sightings and likely habitat. No encounters were noted.

### *Illinois*

During the January-March season 1160 hours were spent on field surveys. No conclusive evidence was obtained from search effort or Reconyx @ camera deployments.

### *Cornell Mobile Search Team*

Areas surveyed included the Atchafalaya, Pascagoula, and Mobile River Basins. The effort totaled 414 person days.

### *Total Search Expenditures*

In Fiscal Year 2008 \$615,444 was spent on cooperative search efforts.

### **Biological Planning**

The Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture Office played an important role in accomplishing key components of Ivory-billed Woodpecker conservation. Their work is a model of collaborative development and use of technology, engaging many diverse partners. Habitat Characterization projects continue, by Mapping the Potential Natural Vegetation of the Tensas Basin and Mississippi River in Northeastern Louisiana. This expands the series of projects conducted in Arkansas over the past five years to construct Potential Natural Vegetation (PNV) maps at a level of detail appropriate for the planning and design of lowland forest restoration efforts. The Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture office (LMVJV) and other partners have recognized the utility of the PNV maps for planning habitat restoration in the region, and specifically for restoration of potential Ivory-billed Woodpecker habitat. The Arkansas Delta maps cover the core of the region of interest for this purpose, but additional potential habitat lies outside of Arkansas, particularly in Louisiana and Mississippi. The classification system, community characterization, and mapping criteria are developed based primarily on field evaluations of the plant communities on particular combinations of geomorphic setting, hydrology, and soils. Participants include the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC), and 5-Oaks Wildlife Services of DeWitt, Arkansas. This study will conclude in 2009.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker Science Symposium was held at the National Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette, Louisiana. The June 2008 Conference, hosted by the United States Geological Survey, brought together the scientists in all the ongoing studies to share information needed to complete the recovery plan, guide additional management, and add to the volume of information concerning habitat quantity and quality, historical conditions, and the ecology of surrogate species. These presentations of project findings included Adaptive Search Design and Occupancy Modeling, Stochastic Population Viability Analysis, Decision Support Modeling, Historic Habitat Analysis, Remote-Sensing Habitat evaluation, Woodpecker Density/Forest Structure and

Composition Assessment, Woodboring Beetle Study, Ecological Dynamics of Tree Mortality and Forest Regeneration. Additional presentations were made on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker's pre-Columbian and historical distribution and causes of its decline. Partners included Ducks Unlimited, Louisiana State University, Colorado State University, University of Georgia, University of Maryland, University of Arkansas, USDA Forest Service, Southern Forest Experiment Station and Rocky Mountain Research Station, US Geological Survey, and the National Wetlands Research Center.

In Fiscal Year 2008 approximately \$200,000 in Recovery Funding was obligated for these efforts.

A significant obstacle to the recovery of this species is the lack of information about the biology and ecology of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in bottomland hardwood forests of eastern Arkansas, Florida, and elsewhere in the southeast. In 2007, through an agreement with Arkansas State University, an intensive study was started on the breeding biology of Pileated Woodpeckers in the Big Woods area to provide data on large woodpecker demography and ecology in the bottomland hardwood forests of eastern Arkansas. These data may be used to make future management decisions for the conservation of the population. An important issue that the research will address is the potential limiting influence of predation on the productivity of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker population.

In Fiscal Year 2008 \$56,500 was obligated for the study.

### **Recovery Activities**

The National Wildlife Refuges in Arkansas have focused on planning and management that will enhance the survival and recovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in addition to search effort coordination and educational outreach. The Tensas National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana designed a portable, interactive History Display about the 1935 Cornell Expedition. The display will educate refuge neighbors and local communities about the Ivory-billed Woodpeckers once found and studied there.

Field and Regional Office Staff supported recovery actions by coordinating searches, analyzing technical information to develop outreach materials, developing partnerships, and providing field assistance.

### **Additional Funds and Activities**

#### *Conservation Partnerships*

State Search Teams gathered in Atlanta, Georgia in September during the Recovery Team Meeting to report results from the region-wide surveys. The teams consist of natural resource organizations, non-government partners, and universities from Texas to Florida and north to Canada. Their remarkable dedication and professionalism adds great value to the search. Their ongoing partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service is essential to any recovery effort.

The group discussed audio recordings, sightings, and accumulated evidence from organized searches and public reports. While the definitive confirmation photograph or video was not obtained in the 2007-8 search season, several encounters were documented and multiple recordings are still viewed as very interesting.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program completed planting 2,775 acres of bottomland hardwood trees in the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley states of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Additionally, in 2008, Wetland Reserve Program restoration plans were completed for 3,700 acres in Arkansas. These plans were developed in close coordination with the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

#### *Habitat Conservation Planning Program*

Since the rediscovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker local interests in eastern Arkansas have been concerned that their traditional economic activities; such as farming, hunting, fishing, and forestry might be disrupted. The Big Woods of Arkansas Habitat Conservation Plan will allow the continuation of these activities and promote the recovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and five other endangered species. In 2005, The State of Arkansas received a \$250,250 grant and was successful in competing for a second year in 2006 and in 2007 received \$231,250. This funding supports a collaborative process for habitat conservation and future decision-making for the Big Woods.

Progress to date includes identifying and prioritizing important habitats for each of the listed species, including the Ivory-billed Woodpecker; in order to increase protection and restoration as well as to reduce forest fragmentation. Public outreach has improved cooperative efforts between private landowners and conservation groups to better protect federally listed species in the Big Woods. Meetings of the Corridor of Hope have communicated on-going Ivory-billed Woodpecker conservation efforts to its members, which include a wide spectrum of interests such as private citizens; elected federal, state, county, and city officials; local business men and women; and representatives of non-governmental organizations, chambers of commerce, newspapers, and state and federal agencies. The Steering and Technical Committees were formed and are functional.

The Nature Conservancy developed a questionnaire on local attitudes toward endangered species conservation and distributed it to stakeholders. The completed report can be used inform future outreach and partnership efforts. The survey targeted the general public and landowners located in the Big Woods of Arkansas. Their major findings concluded that majority of respondents supported the conservation of endangered species, and did not see regulations associated with those species as having an effect on them. Both landowners and non-landowners in the survey perceived there were economic benefits (increased tourism) to the Big Woods area. About 50% of the landowners surveyed still have concerns about

government intervention and control of their land if Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were located on their property. An additional report summarizing the impacts of existing land use on endangered species has been prepared and conclusions indicate that current management and protective efforts are sufficient.

#### *Land Acquisition*

In 2008, 1,180 acres were added to the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge. This purchase benefits waterfowl and a host of other species as well as reducing fragmentation by enlarging blocks of bottomland hardwood and providing corridors between areas of suitable habitat.

