

Rare birds reappear

by Robin West

Somewhat like the legendary phoenix, the long-lived mystical bird that burned to death, later rise from the ashes, so too the recent rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker has the makings for good story telling for years to come. My old worn bird book from college days, copyrighted in 1966, listed the ivory-billed woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) as on the verge of extinction “last reported in deep forests of southeast Texas, central Louisiana, northwest Florida, and South Carolina.” In fact, this rare bird had not been confirmed to exist for 61 years until a recent sighting on Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas.

Cache River is just one of 544 national wildlife refuges across the country dedicated to the conservation of fish and wildlife. It is aptly suited to deal with the new challenges sure to face managers in restoring this “lost” species. Established in 1986, with nearly 75% of the acquisition money coming from birders and hunters who purchased Federal Duck Stamps, Cache River Refuge provides protection for a variety of wildlife species while also offering programs for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and photography. Approximately 5,000 acres of the Refuge will have limited access to help protect the woodpecker, while 55,000 acres will remain open for public use. Somewhat concerned that people may flock from around the globe to the Refuge for a chance to spot the rare bird, the protected area where the bird was found was placed off limits, but observation areas have been established on adjacent State and Federal lands.

Many will look at the rediscovery of the bird as a wonder—a second chance to try and preserve a unique part of our natural world. Others will likely look upon it with concern or even disdain—another odd creature to be placed under the protection of the Endangered Species Act that seemingly we as humans have gotten along pretty well without. Such values in a way speak to who we are as a society—vastly polarized, neither view clearly right or wrong. Largely, however, the general future management decisions have already been made for the ivory-billed woodpecker. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with legal mandates and moral resolve, and with the help of many agency and private partners, will work hard to see to the recovery of the woodpecker. Many of us may

never see the bird in the wild, recovered or not. We can, however, listen to it right now. You can log onto <http://www.fws.gov/cacheriver/> to listen to an audio recording of the ivory-billed woodpecker.

Here in the North Country we have a bird with a similar history as the ivory-billed woodpecker. It is the eskimo curlew. Thought to possibly be extinct on and off over recent years, none-the-less the eskimo curlew seems to persist, with possible sightings in at least 30 of the last 86 years. The curlew is alleged to be one of the birds that helped guide Columbus to the New World five centuries ago, at a time, like the passenger pigeon, that the bird probably existed in the “millions.” It is assumed that what eskimo curlews still may exist make their annual migrations from the remote breeding grounds on Arctic tundra to somewhere in South America. Most of the reported sightings since 1945 have come from likely migration and staging areas in Texas—all have come from North America except one in Barbados in 1963 and one in Guatemala in 1977. The exact breeding areas of the birds have yet to be discovered; historically they bred throughout the far North, including Alaska, while the current focus looking for the birds is in Arctic Canada.

How much time and money should people today invest in trying to save animals that were unknowingly put at risk by our ancestors, be it through market hunting or long-term habitat conversion, or the development of pesticides? Such questions have no absolute answers. We have no obvious responsibility to try to fix the mistakes of the past, yet much may be said about our generation in the future by what we try to save and pass on. Ivory-billed woodpeckers and eskimo curlews are creatures for which stories are made. They have demonstrated their unwillingness to disappear from the Earth quickly and without a struggle. I don’t know what their future holds, but all things being equal, I for one hope they win their fight to survive.

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