

# Taking It Personal: Where the Ivory-bill Survives



Large woodpeckers have always carried a great deal of cultural baggage, none more so than the Ivory-bill. Illustration by © John Cuneo.

Revenant or reverie, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker is, hands down, the least-photographed North American bird of this still-young century. It is also, however, just a few years after its purported rediscovery, the single most-published bird of this or any other century: I gave up keeping count early on, but for months I could hardly open the mailbox without finding a wild-eyed, red-crested corpse grinning up at me. Desperate for visual material to illustrate their stories, publications popular and specialist quickly abandoned the trite drama of the Audubon print, the too-familiar black-and-white graininess of the old Cornell photos, and switched to images of ancient specimens, moth-eaten mounts with leering yellow eyes and rusted wires poking rudely through gnarled and painted tarsi.

That is precisely what greeted me as I leafed through the July/August 2005 issue of *Audubon*: two stiff and dusty birds removed from some defunct museum diorama, lying in cardboard trays, their yellowed bills casting ominous shadows across the page. Sober and methodical birder that I am, I should have examined the pictures for undiscovered field marks; but my attention was drawn instead to the specimen label dangling from the tortured foot of the male woodpecker. "Hey, I tied that tag!"



The University of Nebraska State Museum's Ivory-bills probably entered that venerable institution in the late nineteenth century, already stripped of whatever data their original collector may have preserved. When Paul Johnsgard arrived at Nebraska in 1961, he identified the fusty skins still on their backs in the dark of a Cambridge can, but they were not formally catalogued until 20 years later, when a callow undergraduate assigned them accession numbers. I catalogued some hundreds of birds as a work-study student, but few have lingered in my mind all these years like the Ivory-bills. The museum's Eskimo Curlews, its Whooping Cranes and Passenger Pigeons, had all been collected in the day when those birds remained deceptively common, but these no-data woodpeckers were almost certainly among the last of their species, and their death by shotgun pellet contributed starkly and directly to the extinction of their kind.

My reaction to the images in *Audubon*, my irrational need to assert a personal connection to these birds that had died half a century or more before I was born, embarrassed me. At least, I told myself, I was not among those, surprisingly many, weeping in public jubilation at the claimed rediscovery of a species long thought lost (e.g., Leese 2005). And at least I was not among those, equally numerous, hurling e-vitriol at each other on websites devoted to what was already a mean-spirited and contentious debate. But my general moral and intellectual superiority still left the important question unanswered: Why was I—and why, in their own way, were all these others—taking the story of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and its persistence or non-persistence so much to heart?

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Certainly there are individual, even peculiar reasons for the vehemence of some peculiar individuals' reactions. But the eagerness with which—whether they claim to have seen the bird or not—so many birders, ornithologists, and self-appointed internet commentators have staked a personal claim in this species leads me to believe that our current keen interest in the Ivory-bill is not, in most cases, merely individual and merely psychological. Instead, the roots of this "obsession", as so many Ivory-bill buffs describe their own fixation, are fundamentally cultural and historical, and the Ivory-bill debate has been waged with a depth of feeling, and a shallowness of civility, usually reserved for arguments about such vital institutions as sex, politics, and religion.

If it is hard to figure out where sex might come in to the Ivory-bill controversy, it is painfully easy to see politics large and small (Moore 2006). But the subtle role played here by the third of the great taboo topics, religion, has gone largely overlooked. Internet combatants style each other—and, without apparent irony, themselves—"believers", "skeptics", "agnostics", even "atheists". Jerome Jackson's sardonic characterization (2006) of the original re-discovery paper as "faith-based ornithology" was more than just a catchy and quotable line; for in fact, this bird, and other large crested woodpeckers

around the world, have always, somehow, reached deeper into the collective unconscious than materialist science can ever penetrate.



Wrote Audubon (in Rhodes 2006), famously, "Travelers of all nations are also fond of possessing the upper part of the head and the bill of the male, and...were very apt to pay a quarter of a dollar for two or three heads of this woodpecker. I have seen entire belts of Indian chiefs closely ornamented with the tufts and bills of this species..." A hundred years before, Catesby had remarked on the vigorous south-to-north commerce in *Campephilus* bills; valued highly, at two or three deerskins each, they were used in the construction of "coronets" for distinguished native hunters and warriors (Murphy and Farrand 1979). Archeological finds and contemporary observation have abundantly confirmed the sacral and ceremonial meaning of Ivory-billed Woodpecker heads (Barker 2005), a meaning probably only mildly diluted in the red-crested "scalps" dangling as good-luck charms from the shot pouches of white "squatters and hunters" in Audubon's day. The magical significance of woodpeckers and woodpecker parts is attested among the native peoples of North America well into the twentieth century. In the Northwest, shamans decorated their baskets with red feathers from the heads of male woodpeckers (Curtis 1924), and the "God-impersonating dances" of southern California tribes were thought to have full effect only when performed by dancers wearing belts made from the scalps of flickers (Gifford 1927).

Obviously, the woodpecker owes its talismanic association with acts of violent prowess to its powerful bill and blood-red crest. This association appears to be universal and archetypal. Greco-Roman literature and mythology assign many of the major gods animals as familiars, including birds: Jove, for example, is (or is accompanied by) the majestic eagle, Venus a uxorious dove. The woodpecker, though, with its scarlet-plumed helmet, spear-like beak, and raucous cry, is sacred to Mars, a distinction it shares with the war-god's other animal familiar, the wolf, and a role still commemorated today in the name *Dryocopus martius*, scientific moniker for the largest and most blatantly martial of Europe's woodpeckers (MacKay 1975).

Vernacular names, too, both folk-names and book-names, preserve the special aura surrounding the large woodpeckers. In New England, the largish Northern Flicker is said to have been called "shad spirit" and considered a supernatural prophet of the spring run of that fish (Burns 1900). It is the birds of the physically largest genera that bear the most numinous names: in *Dryocopus*, the genus of our familiar Pileated, we have the Helmeted Woodpecker; and *Campephilus* includes, in addition to the Ivory-billed, the Powerful, the Robust, and the Imperial Woodpeckers, all of them as impressive

as their English names suggest. Eloquent as these labels are, however, none reveals as much as an old English name intentionally fabricated to conceal: the evasive term "logcock".



Onomastic taboos—prohibitions against naming the sacred or the supernatural—are universal in human societies, modern and primitive. And such taboos are as inconvenient as they are common: It is awkward to speak of that which cannot be named. Enter the "evasive name", a species of euphemism that conceals the object's "real" name behind the name of a commonplace substitute, a name that can be spoken without fear of frightening or offending the spiritual being under discussion.

Evasive naming is particularly frequent in the language of hunters: "Stag", for example, originally referred simply to a male domestic animal, and it was transferred to male deer as "a nickname...bestowed by hunters on the quarry so that he should not learn that he was in danger" (Lockwood 2006). The names for domestic fowl provided a similar source of harmless veiled references for the wild birds of forest and field; such words as "cock" and "hen" remain prominent in the names, whether of popular or official origin, assigned to game species (Lockwood 1984).

We do not often think of picids as game birds, but to the detriment of at least one now-extinct species, large woodpeckers are good eating (Tanner 1964). And as suggested above, these wild-eyed birds also participate in the ancestral uncanny: They are birds that yet seem more than birds, of our world and yet representative of another. As quarry, they must not be alerted, and as numinous inhabitants of the forest, they must not be offended, by hearing their name.

"Logcock", an early American coinage first applied to the Pileated Woodpecker, was used, too, for the larger Ivory-bill, and folk etymology—the linguistic process that assimilates historically unrelated words—altered it to the name "Lord God" (McAtee 1951). Language abhors a vacuum, and the nonsensical neologism is generally propped up with a story: The name was coined by an observer so thrown by his encounter with the piebald spirit of the woods as to emit an oath in "spontaneous awe" (Hiers 1976). Tellingly, the early sources often identify the naïve and superstitious observer as black, as in Faulkner's "The Bear", where the young hunter at his lonely forest stand hears the "clattering" and drumming of "the big woodpecker called Lord-to-God by Negroes" (Faulkner 1942).

Cleared of its racist overtones, this fragment of folk narrative has been repeated incessantly in media accounts of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker story. The name itself provides the title for perhaps the best and the most readable of the recent spate (a not very good woodpecker pun!) of Ivory-bill books, Phillip Hoose's *Race to Save the Lord God Bird* (2004). Others have found in the unusual name and its fictional etiology in-

spiration for musings ranging from the pious to the scurrilous. Pete Dunne's witty and wonderful *Field Guide Companion* succumbs to the temptation of petty blasphemy when it lists among the "cohabitants" of the Ivory-bill "Wood Duck, Pileated Woodpecker, Lazarus." Dunne also, inevitably perhaps, adds a subtitle to his account for the species: "The Second Coming of the Lord God Bird".

The Ivory-bill's claimed parousia has been treated more seriously, too, in articles, homilies, even hymns celebrating the putative resurrection of a species so long thought extinct. Few other birds could elicit such outpourings; it is hard to imagine an ode on Bachman's Warbler, but the charisma—indeed, the chrism—of the Ivory-bill sets it apart. A week after the April 2005 announcement from Arkansas, an Ascension sermon preached in Philadelphia, the home for a while of Alexander Wilson and Audubon, offered comfort in the idea that "if even the woodpecker can return, then maybe we humans aren't so impossible after all" (Mullen 2005). In Ohio, the site of Audubon's first encounters with the bird, a Lutheran seminarian (Leese 2005) was moved to find in the rediscovery "a sign that humanity's sin...is not yet final or complete." And for Valerie Weaver-Zercher (2006), the story of the rediscovery resonates with the deepest human "desires for the natural and

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Few if any birds exercise the fetishistic fascination of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, shown here in a souvenir photograph taken on a Kirtland Bird Club visit to the Ohio State University Museum of Biological Diversity. © Kirtland Bird Club.

the sacred within us”, and gives us hope that someday all—conservatives and conservationists alike—will be moved to responsible stewardship of the earth.

The great woodpeckers have always inspired the same hopes in scientists. Long before the recent claims from Arkansas and Florida, Robert Ridgway (1887) reported on Benson’s momentous discovery of Imperial Woodpeckers in northern

Sonora; abandoning his usual cool-headedness in such matters, Ridgway predicted that the woodpecker—which he characterized with the apt but, strictly speaking, unnecessary adjective “magnificent”—“would doubtless soon be added to the North American fauna.” Sixty years later, in a beautiful and justly famous essay on the Thick-billed Parrot, Aldo Leopold (1937) speculated in print whether it might be Imperials, still “said to occur in these parts”, that dug the nest holes used by the large parrots, tragically leaving the “pleasant task of discovering the answer” to ornithologists of a future generation.

Leopold wrote that essay in October 1936, shortly after the discovery of Ivory-bills—already then thought extinct—in the Singer Tract. The birds’ persistence in Louisiana had been determined by his colleague and friend Arthur A. Allen, and under Allen’s influence (Hawkins 2005), Leopold devoted a section of another article, “Threatened Species”, to the Ivory-bill. In it, he expressed the hope that the government might be brought to see that it is “time to establish particular parks or their equivalent for particular natural wonders like the Ivory-bill.” In making his—ultimately futile—case for habitat preservation, Leopold (1936) described the “wonder” of the threatened bird not in biological or ecological terms, but as the cultural value of “a bird inextricably interwoven with our pioneer tradition”.



Ridgway’s expectations and Leopold’s efforts were, we now know, in vain. The Imperial Woodpecker of northwest Mexico is most certainly extinct, and the giant woodpeckers of the Singer Tract followed as the trees were felled and the land

turned to soybeans. But today, after three years of claims and rumors, from Arkansas and Florida, hope has risen again that this talisman of the deep southern woods might somehow miraculously have survived. Are they really out there? Perhaps, perhaps. But there can be no doubt that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker persists “in there”, in the hearts, the memories, and the cultural conscience of those of us who will never see the bird.

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