

Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

In 2004 some bird experts in Arkansas spotted something which made headlines across the country! These scientists were sure they had seen an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, even though this species was thought to be extinct for more than 60 years. Even people who aren't too interested in identifying sparrows sat up and took notice of the photos of this bird. It has such an astonishing appearance that over a century ago President Theodore Roosevelt nicknamed it the "Lord God Bird" because that is what people often exclaimed when they saw one.

This is the largest woodpecker in the world, standing 18 to 20 inches tall, with a wingspan of 30 inches. The Ivory-billed Woodpecker looks similar to the old Woody Woodpecker cartoon, with a jet-black body, flashy white patches on its wings, and a pointed crest on its head. Males have a red crest and the head-feathers of females are black. A white stripe extends below each yellow eye. The white bill is not actually ivory, but bone covered with keratin.

Unfortunately not many people have seen them. Even before their habitat was reduced and the species became endangered, the Ivory-billed Woodpeckers lived in swampy, old-growth forests, flying through large wilderness areas to find beetle larvae in dead trees. Each pair of birds needed a large territory, so the species was probably never plentiful.

In 2004, an Ivory-billed Woodpecker was discovered in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, in the Big Woods region of Arkansas. Seven bird experts provided eye-witness accounts of the creature, and videotaped footage presented compelling evidence, but intensive searches by these and other scientists over a five-year period have not succeeded in relocating this magnificent bird.

Today, less than 10 percent of Arkansas' original 8 million acres of forested wetlands remain, and the discovery of the woodpecker galvanized efforts to save remaining habitats which could support this endangered species. The U.S. Department of the Interior, in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, is working to conserve a "Corridor of Hope." It's an area about 120 miles long and 20 miles wide in eastern Arkansas which will receive federal funds for habitat conservation. In addition to attracting the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the forests and rivers in this Corridor shelter seven other endangered species, 265 species of birds, a diversity of fish, and thousand-year-old Tupelo and Cypress trees.

Nature-lovers around the world are hoping for another glimpse of the "Lord God Bird" to assure us that this amazing woodpecker still exists.

Source(s):

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