

25 Sightings of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

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The last known refuge for the Ivory-billed was the Singer Tract. Of the 300,000 species of beetles, the Ivory-billed would eat only three. And of these three they would only eat the larva, and of course the larva stage only lasted three weeks; then the larva turned to pupa, and the Ivory-billed would have to find another rare tree with another rare crop. The larvae were only found in sweetgum and nuttall oak, and then these were only found in swamps, mostly in Louisiana, the Singer Swamp most specifically.

The Singer Sewing machine company arrived at the turn of the 19th century and set up camp beneath the flight track of the woodpecker, and spent the next 20 or 30 years whacking trees in the swamp for sewing machine cabinets. The bird's homeland was then sold to Chicago Mill and Lumber which continued to whack its way through. It built shipping crates, and coffins, in a factory in Louisiana. It also sent the lumber upstream to Chicago where it was used to replace homes lost in the Chicago Fire. By 1940, it was estimated there were six Ivory-bills left in the Singer Tract.+

The Ivory-billed is known as "The Lord God Bird," the name eponymous with the phrase people called to each other when they saw the flashing white crests of the bird in the air. It is one of the largest woodpeckers in the world. Six of the last twenty birds were shot by collectors who wanted them as specimens.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is unique in the annals of American extinctions in that people keep thinking they see this bird. The bird has taken over much of the website at the Cornell School of Ornithology because the scientists want, themselves, to find the bird that people keep thinking they see. Cornell's Department of ornithology sends its scientists to the swamp to investigate the more probable reports. Finally, the ornithology team itself reported a sighting of the bird.

Birding guides such as *Petersen's Guide to the Eastern Birds*, if you are into such things, have succumbed. The entry for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker carries the special note that it is not extinct, as believed, but rather "believed to be extinct."

1.

At home she wore gray housedresses with nylon socks rolled at the knees.

She watched *The Guiding Light*, then *General Hospital*, then *One Life to Live*.

On Sundays she watched *Bonanza*, then *The Fugitive*, then *The Carol Burnett Show*.

On Monday nights she washed her floors. She left dark indentations in the rubber knee pad.

On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays she dressed in patent leather shoes and a

gray print dress and went to her job at Craigen Federal Savings. She worked in

the basement and was known as the vault lady.

In 1924, the founder of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Arthur A. Allen, and his wife Elsa discovered a pair of Ivory-bills near the Taylor River in Florida. Many ornithologists had already considered them to be extinct. In his excitement, Arthur Allen wrote, "I have just enjoyed one of the greatest experiences of my life, for I have found that which they said could not be found—the ivory-billed woodpecker. Once a fairly common bird in many parts of Florida, it is supposed to have followed the Carolina parakeet into extinction. Those who know most about Florida birds held out little hope of my ever seeing one alive, but after a month's search I have found a pair of them and they are very much alive." However, Allen's joy and excitement was shortlived, as soon after his announcement, two local taxidermists shot both birds—legally.++

2.

She took me to the bank once, to see the vault. We walked down two flights of iron steps. I had just read about the pyramids and antechambers at school. The vault door was thick, perhaps the width of three bodies. It was made of lead. It seemed an antechamber to a world she might know about. My grandmother's desk, I thought, looked deceptively simple. There was a black metal trash can next to her desk. I thought this might mask an entrance to a shaft or a chamber. I believed such myths about her—such myths half-formed in my head. Once, a brown envelop filled with jewelry had been thrown in her trash can next to the vault. Because she turned the jewels in, the local newspaper ran a story on it. Her glasses reflected the photographer's flash.