

Back from the dead? Elusive ivory-billed woodpecker not extinct, researchers say
An expedition to the forests of Louisiana say extinction of bird, last definitively seen in 1944, has been exaggerated



This photo taken from movie footage recorded by Arthur Allen in Louisiana in **1935** shows an ivory-billed woodpecker. Photograph: Arthur Allen/Cornell Lab of Ornithology/AFP/Getty Images

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In terms of elusiveness, it is the Bigfoot or Loch Ness monster of the bird world, so rare and undetectable that the US government declared it extinct last year. But the ivory-billed woodpecker is, in fact, still alive and pecking in the forests of [Louisiana](#), a team of researchers has claimed.

A series of grainy pictures and observations of the bird, which had its last widely accepted sighting in 1944, show that the scrupulously furtive woodpecker is still holding on in the swampy forests of the US south, [according to the team's new research, which is yet to be peer-reviewed](#).

A three-year quest to find the woodpecker involved scientists trudging through an undisclosed portion of Louisiana woodland to observe the bird and take audio

recordings. Unmanned trail cameras, set up to take pictures on a time lapse, and a drone were used to capture photos of the creature.

Steve Latta, the director of conservation at the National Aviary in Pittsburgh who led the effort, said each member of the team had encounters with the ivory-billed woodpecker and often heard its call, which has been described like hearing a child puff into a tin trumpet.

Latta himself saw the bird fly upwards in front of him, showing the distinctive white edges to its wings. “It flew up at an angle and I watched it for about six to eight seconds, which was fairly long for an ivory-billed woodpecker,” he said. “I was surprised. I was visibly shaking afterwards. You realize you’ve seen something special that very few people had the opportunity to see.”

The size and the markings of the bird captured in the photos is strong evidence that it is not another woodpecker, such as a pileated or red-headed woodpecker, Latta said. “It reinforced to me that, yes, this bird does exist and left me feeling a sense of responsibility to protect it for the future,” he said.

Ivory-billed woodpeckers were once relatively common, stretching from the Carolinas through the south-east US to Texas. They were, or are, the largest woodpeckers in the US, with the males sporting a distinctive red crest on their heads. They enjoy feasting on insects that accumulate in the bark of recently deceased trees.



Comparison of photographs taken of apparent ivory-billed woodpeckers in Louisiana from this study (A, D), with a colorized ivory-billed woodpecker, also from Louisiana (B), and a pale-billed woodpecker taken in Central America (C). Photograph: The Guardian

Their numbers started to drop sharply in the 19th century due to human interference with their habitat and overhunting, with their scarcity spurring collectors to hunt them further as valuable specimens. They were also eaten by poverty-stricken people of the time who turned to devouring the woodpecker, wild turkeys, gopher tortoises and other wildlife.

With just a few of the birds occupying largely inaccessible forests, confirmed sightings, let alone clear pictures, became almost impossible. Last year, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), after years of listing the woodpecker as critically endangered, [declared the species extinct](#).

“No one has held a camera and got a picture of one in years because it’s a scarce bird in tough swampy habitat and they don’t want people close to them because they’ve been shot at for 150 years,” said Geoffrey Hill, a biologist at Auburn University who took part in another, largely frustrating, trip to find the bird in Florida in 2005.

“They have better eyes than we do, they are high in the trees and actively flee people. They aren’t great thinkers but they have developed a pretty simple strategy to avoid people.”

Hill said Latta’s research was “very interesting” and that he thought it likely that the bird pictured is indeed an ivory-billed woodpecker. He added that the FWS was premature to decide the species was extinct and that several dozen could still be holding on in forests across the south.

“Some people cannot believe a bird can defy documentation by modern humans because we have such dominion over nature but it is endlessly interesting because if it has done that, it’s one pretty impressive bird,” Hill said.

“People who are into birds are fascinated by them. Ivory bills couldn’t care less, though. They hate all people.”