

GALLAGHER, T. **The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.** 272 pages, 8 pages of colour and monochrome images. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005. Hardback, £13.00, ISBN 0618456937.

JACKSON, J.A. **In Search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.** 322 pages, 8 pages of colour images, 37 monochrome figures and 2 maps. New York: Harper Collins, 2006. Paperback, £8.00, ISBN 1588341321.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campyphilus principalis* has for decades headed the list of the world's most sought-after vanished birds. With no generally accepted reports in continental North America since the 1940s, the possibility of its survival seemed extremely remote. News of its rediscovery in the Big Woods region of eastern Arkansas was released in April 2005 (Fitzpatrick, J.W. *et al.* 2005. *Science* 308: 1460–1462), to the amazement of the ornithological community, but for many the sense of awestruck jubilation was short-lived. The validity of evidence was questioned, and the ensuing debate between 'believers' and 'sceptics' has developed into one of the most polarizing controversies in modern ornithology. The stand-off has a significance beyond ornithology as it lays bare some fundamental themes, including the nature of proof in science, and the role of science in conservation.

At the heart of the controversy are two authors, both veteran ivorybill sleuths. They deal with the same story, although their conclusions could hardly be more different. One asserts that the evidence amassed in Arkansas, and published in the journal *Science*, is enough to clinch the identification once and for all; the other holds that this evidence amounts to an indication that the species persists, but not to proof.

First there is *The Grail Bird*, Tim Gallagher's entertaining, upbeat, folksy account of the rediscovery. Early chapters deal with ivorybill history, based on fairly extensive background research. Thereafter, the plot meanders through a series of failed surveys and undocumented sightings towards the unveiling of glorious, full-frame proof of ivorybills, but alas, this 'proof' turns out to be a few seconds of grainy footage – the famous video. To anyone who has studied it, the anticlimax is breathtaking, especially as the evidence can be interpreted in conflicting ways (Sibley, D.A. *et al.* 2006. *Science* 311: 1555; Jackson, J.A. 2006. *Auk* 123: 1–15). Nonetheless, the author writes with stirring conviction about his own sighting at Bayou de View, and his sincerity is never in doubt. No reference list is given for sources, but an index is provided.

Then there is *In search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker*, Jerome Jackson's account of painstaking research, near misses and possibilities. Herein lies virtually everything known about the species, presented in a well-organized format, with an index and a comprehensive reference list for each chapter. The narrative is generally terse, scholarly, occasionally wry, but always very clear. It gives a fascinating insight into the history of this bird, from the first reports to a detailed review of status, past and present. We learn of its totemic significance in Native American culture, and its previous abundance in some southern swamps and hardwood forests. According to Jackson, the logging of those forests removed most surviving ivorybill populations, and the market demand for rare skins did the rest. He provides an account of the heartbreaking struggle to save the Singer Tract, where the last fully documented population of ivorybills bred until the 1940s. He also writes about searches in Cuba, where old-growth forests have all but disappeared, and his own claim to have seen an ivorybill is not exactly watertight ('All I really saw was a large bird'). We are left with no hope of the survival of the Cuban race, which seems likely to have been a species-level taxon (Fleischer, R.C. 2006. *Biology Letters* 2: 466–469), and little room for optimism on the mainland.

Both books deal with the contributions of early American ornithologists, although Jackson's coverage is more comprehensive. In tandem, they provide two renditions of early anecdotes (including the destruction of Alexander Wilson's hotel room by an ivorybill), and two viewings of famous images (including a photograph of William Brewster and Frank Chapman during their trip along the Suwanee River, Florida, in 1890, one holding a freshly killed ivorybill, the other a shotgun). Both authors describe Arthur Allen's sightings in the 1920s and 1930s, and catalogue the subsequent trickle of unconfirmed sightings, several of which are difficult to discount. The possibility of survival is kept very much alive, but here the similarity ends.

First published in 2004, the hastily reprinted 2006 edition of Jackson's book contains an epilogue explaining his misgivings about the Arkansas announcement, and his fears that we have taken a step towards what he calls 'faith-based ornithology'. The crux of his argument is that Gallagher, and his numerous co-authors in *Science*, failed to refute the null hypothesis that all recent sightings involved Pileated Woodpeckers *Dryocopus pileatus*, especially as 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof'. This epithet, attributed to Carl Sagan, has become a mantra for the sceptics. Re-reading Gallagher's account and reviewing the video almost two years after the initial media frenzy, the inadequacy of documentation is glaring. Images and sounds collected in Arkansas might involve ivorybills, but no piece of evidence appears to be conclusive.

The announcement of the rediscovery was seized upon as a rare piece of good news during a gloomy period. It

set major political wheels in motion, raised millions of dollars for ivorybill conservation, and aroused a national feeling of goodwill – America rejoiced at the spirit of survival against all odds (Dalton, R. 2005. *Nature* 437: 188–190). Unsurprisingly, scepticism has met with popular and institutional resistance, even though bringing this species back from the dead in the 21st century would be nothing short of miraculous.

The ivorybill long ago achieved mythic status beyond all other birds, at least in the US, but events of the last two years have added new dimensions to its fame. It is an icon, which could forever symbolize the wasteful destruction of the American wilderness, or its successful regeneration. It could stand as a tragic and cautionary reminder of nature's fragility in the face of human greed, or a living catalyst for reconciliation between mankind and environment. The story hangs in the balance. Both books reviewed here provide a timely insight into its significance and, given their different styles and conclusions, they are best read in counterpoint with critical faculties intact.

Well founded or not, the claimed sightings have re-kindled vital search efforts in key locations, including the Choctawhatchee River basin in the Florida panhandle, where recent inconclusive encounters have been reported (Hill, G.E. *et al.* 2006. *Avian Conservation & Ecology* 1(3): Art. 2; published online: [www.ace-eco.org/vol1/iss3/art2/](http://www.ace-eco.org/vol1/iss3/art2/)). Indisputable proof may flood the Internet tomorrow, vindicating the conservation effort and triggering widespread celebration. If it is not forthcoming, we should remember that the world is full of threatened species, many of which – if we postpone our efforts to save them – will slip, like the ivorybill, towards extinction.

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