—Postcard from America—
The hunt for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker

Ragupathy Kannan

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I awoke with a start and looked around with wide eyes. And then I instantly relaxed, comforted by the gentle swaying of the tree hide, the hiss of the wind through the towering cypresses and the torpor inducing mid-day heat—the very entities that sent me dozing off in the first place. I was ensconced in a tree-blind high up a tupelo tree in the middle of the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas (USA), on the hunt for "Lord Ibwo"—the elusive, recently rediscovered Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis*. I had pangs of guilt nodding off occasionally and letting my guard down but I'd have been less human if I hadn't. The days were long, quiet, and pretty much uneventful up in those blinds. The birding was great early in the day, but then that too tapered off as time wore on. Only the occassional appearance of the similar-looking Pileated Woodpecker *Dryocopus pileatus*, which made our hearts lurch with anticipation, or the loud flopping of garfishes in the murky waters beneath, broke the monotony.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is the lord of all birds in North America. Legend has it that early settlers, stunned by its size and regal appearance, exclaimed "Lord God what bird is that!" and hence the nickname, 'The Lord God Bird'. Until its rediscovery in 2004, it had not been seen for 60 years. An inhabitant of tall cypress swamps, its last remaining habitat was logged using German P.O.W.s in 1945. In February 2004, Gene Sparling, a lone kayaker, spotted one by the Cache River (a tributary of the Mississippi), and it made sensational news when Cornell University announced it, a year later, after a secret coordinated search. Cornell then advertised nation-wide for crack birders to further help out with the search effort. I applied and was chosen. And that's how I found myself up in that tupelo tree that languid April afternoon.

We were an excellent team—a motley assemblage from all walks of life. There was no breaking-in period. We plunged into the swamp right away, under the stern leadership of Beth Cartwright (who we affectionately called SWMBO—She Who Must Be Obeyed). We volunteers had one thing in common, a deep passion for the outdoors. Cornell did a great job handpicking this bunch, I often thought. It requires fanatical dedication to the cause to put up with 12–14hrs of work every day. And each day involved some or all these activities: paddling for 2–4hrs up the Byzantine maze of creeks using the GPS, hiking through boot-sucking squelchy swamps to look for cavities or scaling, dodging and side-stepping the ubiquitous cottonmouth vipers, getting tired of the standard fare of PJ sandwiches and Trail Mixes, and keeping eyes and ears primed for Lord Ibwo at all times. We were dropped off at dawn and picked up after dark. And after return to camp, we had to charge batteries, fill up and file away the data sheets, and put up with Beth's ravings on that often incomplete data sheet or that $500 video camera that took a dive into the swamp. All, while our rather sketchy dinner was getting microwaved. And none of us complained. Not even once.

Through it all, I was vastly impressed by the science and by the meticulously systematic nature of Cornell's quest for the rare bird. Each of us had specific places to cover under specific time frames each day. We recorded our *watches* (where we positioned ourselves stationary in a particular spot) and *tracks* (where we paddled or trudged around on pre-determined routes), faithfully in our GPS. We all had cell phones with which we could contact each other or SWMBO at any time. If Lord Ibwo made a flyby, we were ready to note the time and direction and alert the person(s) in that direction. If we heard a call, we were to note the time and cross-check with the automated recorder units (ARUs) stationed around the refuge. Since we had video cameras running much of the time, any encounter could have been recorded both by audio and video.

Audio recordings were subjected to sophisticated multivariate analyses to judge the probability that it was from an Ibwo. Potential Ibwo-like nasal *"kent"* calls were plotted as dots on a graph with several ellipses, each ellipse showing clusters of dots representing known recordings of the Ibwo (from a 1925 Cornell expedition) and of other birds that make the occasional *kent*-like calls: White-breasted Nuthatch, Blue Jay, and Red-winged Blackbird. An unknown *kent* call recording, if it falls in or near the Ibwo ellipse, would represent a tantalizing clue of its presence. The pattern and credence of the characteristic double-knocks made by Ibwos were also used in the search. Any sound that even remotely resembled a double-knock was analyzed. We did not get such a recording (or any encounter for that matter) during our two-week tenure, but other teams did. Despite the negative results, what we did was hard-core science, and it was downright fascinating.

No account of an early spring sojourn in a south-eastern swamp would be complete without a paragraph on Cottonmouths (an *Agkistrodon* viper) and so here goes. Each of us had around ten encounters daily. Yes, *per day*! Initially, their menacing appearance evoked apprehension and

revulsion, even to a seasoned naturalist like me. I had a hard time concentrating in the field, having to multi-task between looking up for Ibwos, gazing frequently at GPS and compasses, filling up data sheets, and watching where I put my foot or parked my posterior! And on more than one occasion we nearly stepped on these seemingly omnipresent reptiles. They could remain almost invisible, their black color camouflaging them against the dark ooze. The most disconcerting thing was their habit of staying put when approached. They coil up, displaying their wide-open mouth whose color justified their popular name. Fresh from out of hibernation, they were on a feeding spree and were seeking each other to procreate. And boy, did they procreate! We saw them court and mate all day under our blinds or within feet of our watch spots. But toward the end, our fears were replaced by genuine respect for these swamp denizens. They are gentle folk, and their much-publicized aggressive disposition is more of an exaggeration than reality. They really want to leave you alone and be left alone.

In those hectic two weeks, it was a treat to run into, and even spend time with the some of the original players in the Ibwo rediscovery saga, notably the genial and very likeable Gene Sparling (the kayaker who first saw the bird in 2004), who remained a picture of humility and was a constant source of fascinating anecdotes; and the rather self-promoting Bobby Harrison who, with his incredible zeal, works hard to get that indisputable Ibwo photo and who frequently entertains Ibwo pilgrims with his collection of tantalizing but inconclusive blurs. And this being ground zero for the rediscovery of the century, there were the inevitable VIP visitors. One quiet afternoon, when I had not seen a human in hours, I eased out of my wet pants and let them hang out on my blind. As I sat there half naked with my binoculars focused on a Prothonotary Warbler's *Protonotaria citrea* nest, a canoe-load of people floated silently past. I did not have time to put on my pants. Later on I realised that that might have been the canoe with Congressman Vic Snyder.

A scantily clad Cornell volunteer may have been the most memorable thing that the Congressman saw that afternoon in Cache River. With no conclusive sightings since a flurry of encounters in 2004, the woodpecker seems to have now acquired a nebulous "*found and lost*" status. With that series of sight records (which were by trained observers), and a blurry video, Cornell sticks to its guns and calls it conclusive evidence of the presence of at least one bird in spring of 2004. Others disagree. Many are waiting for that "Kodak moment" picture to rest their suspicions. Until then I plan to volunteer my time as much as I can in the search effort. With old growth habitat slowly becoming more available with increased protection, we owe it to the Lord God Bird to find a viable population and protect it, so future generations paddling down the shady bayous can exclaim "Lord God, what bird is that!"

—Reviews—

Birds in Bhutan: Status and distribution

By Peter Spierenburg. 2005. Bedford, UK: Oriental Bird Club. 383 pages. ISBN 0-9529545-1-6. Hardback. £40.

This is an important and timely publication and the author, Peter Spierenburg, and the Oriental Bird Club (OBC) are to be congratulated for such an achievement. My understanding is that this book was funded largely from the generous bequest left by Bertram Smythies to the OBC. Hopefully he too would have been pleased with such a project. The 383 pages include two colour maps denoting domestic political boundaries within Bhutan and a very basic topographical map of the kingdom. Given that mapping was such a keystone element of this publication, a much larger, more detailed map showing the co-ordinates and gridlines upon which Spierenburg based his distribution maps should have been and essential requisite. The lack of such a map makes a complete understanding of the work difficult, at best. The introduction is brief and to the point and sets out the author's aims, "to describe the distributions of birds in Bhutan, in relation to their ecology." Spierenburg then provides a detailed review of his methodology including: preparing the dataset; analysis of distribution patterns; data presentation and a discussion of the completeness of the coverage. The sections are accompanied by a variety of charts, maps and graphs illustrating the author's analysis. The chapters that follow include important and interesting essays: "History of bird study in Bhutan"; "Habitats", which includes a useful summary of the habitat types present in