



# **The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker**

*Tim Gallagher*

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What is it about the ivory-billed woodpecker? Why does this ghost of the southern swamps arouse such an obsessive level of passion in its devotees, who range from respected researchers to the flakiest Loch Ness monster fanatics and Elvis chasers?

Since the early twentieth century, scientists have been trying their best to prove that the ivory-bill is extinct. But every time they think they've finally closed the door, the bird makes an unexpected appearance. It happened in the 1920s, and it's happened in almost every subsequent decade.

For more than 60 years, each sighting has been met with ridicule and scorn. Respected researchers and naturalists have been branded as quacks just for having the temerity to say that the ivory-bill still exists. Yet the reports still trickle in. Is there any truth to these sightings, or are they just a case of wishful thinking, misidentification, or outright fabrication?

To unravel the mystery, author Tim Gallagher heads south, deep into the eerie swamps and bayous of the vast Mississippi Delta, searching for people who claim to have seen this rarest of birds and following up—sometimes more than 30 years after the fact—on their sightings. He meets a colorful array of characters: a cigar-chomping ex-boxer who took two controversial pictures of an alleged ivory-bill in 1971; a former corporate lawyer who abandoned her career to search for ivory-bills full time; two men who grew up in the ivory-bill's last known stronghold in a final remnant of primeval forest in Louisiana.

With his buddy Bobby Harrison, a true son of the South from Alabama, Gallagher hits the swamps, wading through hip-deep, boot-sucking mud and canoeing through turgid, mud brown bayous where deadly cottonmouth water moccasins abound. In most cases, they are clearly decades too late. But when the two speak to an Arkansas backwoods kayaker who saw a mystery woodpecker the week before and has a description of the bird that is too good to be a fantasy, the hunt is on.

Their Eureka moment comes a few days later as a huge woodpecker flies in front of their canoe, and they both cry out, "Ivory-bill!" This sighting—the first time since 1944 that two qualified observers positively identify an ivory-billed woodpecker in the United States—quickly leads to the largest search ever launched to find a rare bird, as researchers fan out across the bayou, hoping to document the existence of this most iconic of birds.

## **The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker Details**

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# **From Reader Review The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker for online ebook**

## **Adria says**

entertaining stories of his search for extinct woodpecker

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## **Tung says**

The nonfiction account of the rediscovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, a bird thought to have been extinct for over sixty years. For birdlovers, this bird is the Holy Grail of birdsightings (hence the title). Gallagher is a birdlover who decides to chase recent rumors of Ivory-billed Woodpecker sightings across the Southeast US. What he finds leads him to the swamps of Louisiana where he spies a bird he has fantasized about his whole life. The book then details the frantic attempts to capture hard proof of the woodpecker's existence. The prose is engaging and the description of his first sighting is exciting in ways you couldn't imagine birdwatching to be. Another compliment is the way Gallagher handles the urging for wildlife land preservation as a result of his sighting. Rather than an annoying "We love Mother Earth"/PETA/treehugger/militant environmentalist world view, Gallagher presents an argument for land conservation out of the mindset of "here's a beautiful bird, and what a shame it would be for others not to get to see it, so let's try to save the only area where it could possibly survive" perspective. It's compelling without the political or fanatical noise. My only criticisms of the book are its pacing and excitement threshold. On the pacing, Gallagher presents the climactic moment of his Ivory-bill sighting in the middle of the book, with another one hundred pages still to go. The last hundred pages describing the evidence-gathering and ultimate press announcement of the bird's rediscovery never quite regain the height of excitement of the first sighting. So the last hundred pages or so are anticlimactic and drag a little. As far as the excitement threshold, I could only get engaged with the author to a point. Ultimately, I find birdwatching on the level of excitement of bowling or darts. Despite the rapid prose and fine description, this is still a book about a bird, extinct or not. Gallagher's descriptions of people whose entire life goal is to spot this one bird, or whose love of the bird borders on obsession becomes just that – a niche obsession description. Your acceptance and opinion of this book will be based somewhat on how far you find the obsession ridiculous or comprehensible. I'm right in the middle of that spectrum. Nature lovers will rank this book higher; others may rank this even lower.

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## **Russell says**

Here's the story: The ivory-billed woodpecker has been considered extinct since the 1940's. Occasionally, however, someone still reports a sighting. Over the decades there have been a small group of fanatics (ranging from experienced birdwatchers to kooky bigfoot chasers) who have kept on searching for the bird. All of this has met with justified skepticism from the experts. Then, in 2004, an employee of the prestigious Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Tim Gallagher, reported that he saw the bird. The Lab, along with the Nature Conservancy, proceeded to do a search for the bird. Various people involved reporting possible sightings, but nobody was able to provide reliable evidence. The best evidence was a fuzzy video of a bird flying away from the camera. Some of the searchers were convinced that it was an Ivory-bill, but not everyone is so certain.

I found this book most interesting when viewed as an exercise in critical thinking. Gallagher's story is told with enthusiasm and confidence, which will probably lead most casual readers to believe him without question. However, there are problems with the story.

First, he starts the book by complaining about all the skeptics who don't believe any of the ivory-bill sightings, painting them as narrow-minded. Then, throughout the book he introduces various fanatical characters who helped him and/or inspired him in his search. It is clear that Gallagher is also a fanatic, and one with some classic fanatic's faults. For example, when telling the story of Mary Scott, a new-agey and amateur ivory billed enthusiast who reports a few sightings, he describes the skepticism that others have about her reports. But then he proceeds to say how he found her stories compelling anyway, without offer any real reason for it.

Ultimately, it is hard to be convinced that Gallagher, or anyone else, has really seen the bird in several decades. Most of the stories are anecdotal, and they all involve only fleeting glimpses of the birds. These are conditions where even experts can be fooled, especially when they want so badly to see one!

Gallagher's frustrations with the skeptics are understandable. I don't doubt that he really believes that he saw the bird. However, although he seems to understand that solid evidence is necessary in science, he doesn't emotionally want to accept this. Consequently, he is willing to believe that the video of the bird flying away is enough proof. I've seen the video, however, and it isn't enough. It's a poor quality video and there is no way that even an experienced birder can look at it and confidently say that it is an ivory-bill.

Does all of this prove that the ivory-bill doesn't exist or that Gallagher and others haven't seen them? Of course not. But it is doubtful, and until someone can provide solid evidence of the living bird, it is wisest to remain a skeptic.

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## **Joe White says**

For the casual reader this might only rank as 2 stars. For an ornithologist it probably would rank 5 stars.

This is told as a first person story in a casual style, devoid of appealing to "save the environment" rhetoric. It does emphasize the loss of native habitat and the loss of the giant trees of the Southern hardwood forests. The historical research into the ivory bill begins with the story of the people who were the last to see them when the woodpeckers were still surviving in the early 20th century. It is told in narrative tale from interviews with any surviving people who had contact, or who directly knew the ones who did and are now gone.

In the search for current members of the species, there are a limited set of characters following up on more recent sightings, and it is the search by these people who become the focus of the story. The hardships of traveling in a real swamp with limited time and equipment resources are related, while building up the suspense of near or unconfirmed sightings. What is crystal clear is that while the characters listed may have extensive credentials, they are just regular people with other responsibilities in life who happen to have a strong focus on birds, and the ivory bill in particular. The importance of individual specialized talents such as audible species recognition on the fly and the visible observance and recording of field notes from flashes of visible sightings becomes self apparent.

The author is a magazine writer, and I think that the book is told more in a sense of being a continuation of a series articles in a magazine where each chapter may be brief and self contained. These articles are broken down into individual treks into specific areas and mention such distractions as long drives to access

relatively remote locations, poor mapping and access, unfunded limited resource endeavors which are undertaken more as weekend or short week long vacation or casual type searches, where there was actually a need for expedition type support with better camping and travel equipment, as well as the need for the high tech audio and video equipment that is provided from personal funds.

There is the sense of accomplishment at the end where enough unconfirmed sightings, and limited video and audio recordings do substantiate that a remaining pocket of these birds still exists. Actions to preserve the habitat are implied but at the time of writing, no formal plan had apparently been outlined. Also it was disappointing that no full photos or video sequences were available to actually display in current resolutions and color what this bird actually looks like. That missing element underscores the difficulty of the efforts involved in this search.

As a final footnote, I now have a more negative outlook on Singer sewing machines, as the responsibility for the destruction of some of the best and last habitat consisting of towering large girth trees was pinned to the loggers controlled by that company. While the building of the quality cabinets played an important financial function and supported a skilled woodworking labor force in Arkansas, I never realized what type of trees and forests were destroyed in obtaining the lumber.

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### **Betty says**

Reading this book made me want to go in search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. It also caused me to dislike Singer sewing machines.

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### **Stephen says**

There are several books out about the legendary ivory-billed woodpecker. They all are good, but in their own way, each is very different. Gallagher's is an adventurous romp that takes you along for the ride. Along the way we meet many of the people and places that are part of Ghost Bird's mythos.

"I feel like I'm really hanging out alone on a limb with the Sasquatch chasers and Elvis sighters," he laments at one point.

"You definitely are" replied ivory-bill chaser David Luneau.

Gallagher pulls us into the chase; we are "hot of the trail" with him in a canoe in Bayou de View, the Arkansas swamp where the lost species was rediscovered in 2004. The discovery became a national sensation. Hope had prevailed. Or had it? The Ghost Bird remains just as ghostly.

If the ivory-billed woodpecker does still exist, it has become a master of evasion, but that's just the point. Sometimes to survive, that's exactly what you have to do.

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### **Craig says**

This book's mission is to make you believe that the Ivory Billed Woodpecker, thought to be extinct since late

last century, is in fact still flapping its way around in the swamps of southeastern U.S.A.

A team from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology made the short, blurry film of a large bird flying in a remote swamp and caused a rare controversy in the birding community. What followed the release of the film clip was a flurry of activity in that part of the country where hopeful birders "flocked" for a chance to see a true Lazarus species (a species that is mistakenly thought to be extinct only to be "rediscovered" again). No one claimed success and it's fair to say that this claim is without any merit.

The book tries to build a case for the Ivory Bill's continued existence by first laying out all the reasons why you should in fact be skeptical. Next, after laying that foundation, the book shifts gears and attempts to elicit sympathy from the reader by explaining how Ivory Bill populists are widely dismissed, ostracized by the birding community as wackos, and should be given more of a chance.

The book is ultimately unconvincing but you have to admire the passion and dedication the author and his team bring to the party. I don't personally think there will ever be definitive proof that Ivory Bills still exist. Based on the available evidence I am firmly in the camp that believes that this magnificent bird is no longer among us. Tragic as it is, sometimes you just have to let go.

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### **Peg (Marianna) DeMott says**

I read this book for my Noble County book club. It's another example of a book that explains why being part of a book club is a good thing. It would have been unlikely for me to pick up this book and I almost surely would not have finished it if I knew a discussion weren't coming up.

The book at over 250 pages could easily have been edited down to 150. I could have done without all the stories of back road wrong turns and small town cafes. So why did I bump the stars up to four and push it in my husband's hand and tell him he really needed to read it? It's because it did a great job of reminding me that even small individual choices can make a big difference. I was saddened to be reminded of the devastation that greed has wrecked on our planet in just the past 100 years. By the late 1990's the world's bird experts were pretty much convinced that the beautiful ivory-billed woodpecker was extinct then a back country kayaker became convinced that he had sighted one. This sighting spurred many exploratory trips by Cornell's expert birders. I won't spoil it but this became a real adventure/suspense story in 2004.

The ivory-billed woodpecker's habitat had been slowly but steadily destroyed first by demand for timber by such things as Model T tires and then cypress furniture. The final blow came in the late 60's and 70's when vegetarian demand for meat substitutes drove the price of soy sky high and farmers were draining every swamp around to grow soybeans.

Bottom line I hope to think carefully before I buy stuff, and ask more often, do I really need it? I'm not so good at doing this but will try harder to remember, every piece of plastic and wood I claim is having planet consequences. A good reminder as I go into retirement with a reduced budget for stuff.

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### **Val says**

I loved this book! As a bird nerd I found it exciting to read. I could sense the energy of the researchers and now I want to head south and look for one myself!

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## **J.K. Grice says**

Ever since I was a boy, I've had a keen interest in endangered animals, and particularly, the ivory-billed woodpecker. Even in the 1970's, it was basically considered extinct. I was always fascinated by this giant woodpecker that had been historically abundant in the swamps of Florida and Louisiana, and then all but disappeared with the further encroachment of man.

THE GRAIL BIRD is a modern day adventure that took place several years ago. It involved scientists and ornithologists concentrating their efforts to track down the ivory bill in a remote swamp region of Arkansas. Gallagher's account reads like part memoir and part novel. This is just an amazing book.

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## **Karen Grove Trimmer says**

Have to be a birder to appreciate this book. It's informative, not entertaining.

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## **Lynn says**

This was an interesting read! I'd love to see an ivory-billed woodpecker. Since this book was published in 2005, I need to research the status of the species today.

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## **Stewart Tame says**

This is the story of the rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker. For years, it was believed extinct. The last universally accepted sighting was reported in the 1940's. The old growth forests of the South where it made its home had been logged into oblivion. But ...

Sporadic reports kept trickling in. However, since the established consensus was that the bird was extinct, these reports were viewed with an open skepticism and ridicule normally reserved for bigfoot sightings. But, in 2004, researchers from Cornell University established the presence of the birds in the swamps and bayous of the Mississippi delta. Their rediscovery was announced in 2005 as the book was going to press.

It's a fascinating story of perseverance. Admittedly, no photographic evidence was captured. The middle of the book has a selection of photos. But few are of ivory-billed woodpeckers, and, of those, none are more recent than 1970, and that one is controversial, or at least it was at the time. I figured that the lack of recent photos meant that the expedition had been a failure. But, reading on, I was happy to discover that I was wrong. Admittedly, I'm a layperson with regards to birds, but it seems like too many birders of sterling reputation and impressive skills have seen these birds now for there to be any doubt, photos or not. And, for all I know, photos have been taken in the interval since this book was published. The bird tends to live in areas where few people venture, so it's not surprising that sightings are rare.

Anyway, this was a fun book. Recommended!



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## **Cienna Lyon says**

Fantastic overview of one species of bird. The sources in the back are also appreciated. If you want to know the modern history of the ivory-billed woodpecker, this book is a must. I love science writing and storytelling so I found this very interesting. The last half can be extremely repetitive but is still interesting. I've always been fascinated by extinct birds and other animals. It makes me want to do more research. It also has a major portion of the story set in Ithaca, NY where my family is from and where I went to college so it has a special place in my heart for multiple reasons. Glad I read this.

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## **Tippy Jackson says**

I picked this book up with high hopes and low expectations, but I was beyond pleasantly surprised. I was thinking-how can an author make one little bird sighting into an entire book and still keep it interesting? Tim Gallagher does just that. The first part of his book is about the history and legend behind the ivory-bill-the last accepted sighting, images, sound recordings and all of the possible credible sightings since. He mixes this with stories of his research, interviews and some of his trips. This was a great technique for keeping it interesting. As you travel back through the birds' history, it can be very depressing. He talks about visiting what was once vast tracks of old growth land that has been completely decimated. One of the last ivory-bill sightings went something like this: a man claimed he saw one, was called crazy by another guy at a hotel, who then taunted him to "prove it," at which point the man left with a gun and brought back the corpse of a bird so endangered nobody even believed it still existed. Reading about things like these would be too much if he didn't bring you back to the present, with the newest sightings and his endless search (with his partner in crime, Bobby) to stop the horrible sadness. And then, it happened. Following up on a sighting he and Bobby see, without a doubt, an ivory-billed woodpecker. And I cried. But, we're only half way through! Will they be able to prove what they saw? Will they be laughed out of their careers (I wish I could say that this was an exaggeration on his part, but sadly my experience in the science world has told me otherwise)? If they announced their discovery, will the habitat be bombarded by birders and the woodpeckers disturbed? How can they get protection for this last little area of habitat that might hold this precious species? Can they get new images and sound recordings? This is the second half of the book, still keeping you on your toes.

After finishing this book, I checked out the Cornell website and looked up the ivory-bill. Five years after this book was published, I saw many updates and some of the images he was talking about in his book. Even better, I saw annual reports from the Fish and Wildlife Service and a Species Survival Plan for this bird. Acres of land now protected. Research being conducted. Other animals that make use of this habitat have this little bit of habitat protection as well. And after reading all of the horrible stories of chances humans passed up and the devastation they brought, I saw a new opportunity. A chance to be better than those before us. To heal some of the wasteful destruction. And I saw people taking that opportunity. And I cried again. Make no mistake, I am aware of the many ways people will try to fight the protection of this land. In fact, it has already been happening. But, there are people who are fighting. Yay!

BTW, for some shameless self-promotion, if you like reading about animals, check out my blog on wildlife at <http://backyardzoologist.wordpress.com/>

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