In Search of the Holy Grail Bird

It’s been just over 2 years since the stunning announcement that Ivory-billed Woodpecker may still roam in the deep swamps of Arkansas. In those two years there is has been a lot of hunting and much debate over the truth in that revelation. But Cornell Lab of Ornithology continues to search and to hope. In a May 18th press release at the end of a second search season they started off by saying:

There were teasing glimpses and tantalizing sounds, but the 2005-2006 search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas has concluded without the definitive visual documentation being sought. The search, led by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, with support from Audubon Arkansas, stretched from November through April when ivory-bill activity would be highest and a lack of leaf-cover permitted clear views through the dense forest. The search included 22 full-time searchers and state-of-the-art acoustic and video monitoring technology. To supplement the full-time effort, volunteer groups of 14 spent two weeks at a time helping to search the 550,000-acre area focused on the Cache and White River NWR.

One of those volunteer groups included, Dr. Robert Fulton, a resident of Union County, NC better known to locals as the RiverGeezer. An English professor by trade, Robert’s life-long love of nature reached a pinnacle recently when he was chosen by Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology to be a member of a research team looking for additional documentation of the 2004 re-discovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker in the swamps of Arkansas. This once-in-a-lifetime experience took place this past April in the Bayou de View area of Arkansas’s Big Woods, where Dr. Fulton and five other volunteers spent two weeks exploring the swamp and working with two of the bird’s early identifiers, Bobby Harrison and Gene Sparling. Prior to this search, in March, Robert participated in a project sponsored by the Nature Conservancy and state and federal wildlife agencies in the Congaree National Park of SC, where he helped evaluate suitable habitat for “The Lord God Bird.”

But Dr. Fulton doesn’t want to keep this experience to himself. He’s on a mission to share it with as many folks as will listen. So he is coming to Charlotte to kick off this season of Mecklenburg Audubon programming on Thursday, September 7th to share his adventures on both the Cache River in Arkansas and the Congaree in South Carolina. Robert’s expertise, well-polished speaking skills, and lively sense of humor ensure that his presentations are entertaining and informative. Learn first-hand how the research teams conducted their often-grueling assignments. And what their findings are telling them about this Ghost bird.
Field Trips

All Mecklenburg Audubon Field Trips are free and open to the public. Directions for all trips can be found on the Mecklenburg Audubon website - meckbirds.org. Click on Field Trips. Please remember to contact the trip leaders several days before the trip. If you don’t, you may not receive information about last minute changes or cancellations. Also, if they don’t know you are coming.

Sunday - August 27, 2006
Orangeburg Sod Farms, Orangeburg, SC - Full Day Field Trip

The Super Sod Farms just outside Orangeburg, SC is an amazing place in August and September. The large expanse short grass is a magnet for migrating shorebirds. Upland, buff-breasted and pectoral sandpipers are particularly fond of this place and if we are really lucky a golden plover will be lurking in the grass. And as the morning heats up we usually find ourselves looking at a lot of really neat dragonflies and beautiful butterflies.

There won’t be a lot of walking but you should bring a hat, sunscreen, bug spray and plenty of water because it will be HOT, and as always snacks are encouraged.

Because there is no shade at the sod farms we try to get down there as early as possible. We will meet in the Shoney’s parking lot on Carowinds Blvd. at 6 AM. If you are coming from Charlotte, Shoney’s will be directly across Carowinds Blvd. from the exit ramp.

If you are interested in going, contact Judy Walker [704-537-8181].

Sunday - September 10, 2006
McAlpine Creek Greenway - ½ Day Field Trip

Birds are not the only beautiful winged creatures that can be found in the Charlotte area. Butterflies are at their peak in September when a wide variety can be found. The Mecklenburg Park and Recreation Department has created wonderful habitat for butterflies at McAlpine Creek Greenway. We will take a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll around the greenway to see what we can find. Of course we will look at any feathered fliers that cross our path as well.

We will meet at 1:30 PM at the Monroe Rd. entrance to the Greenway. If you are interested in participating, contact Taylor Piephoff at 532-6336 or piephofft@aol.com.

Thursday - September 14, 2006
Ann Springs Close Greenway, Ft. Mill, SC - ½ Day Field Trip

In nearby Fort Mill, SC, Anne Springs Close Greenway is a great place to spend the morning birding. The many trails, ponds, floodplains, fields and Lake Haigler offer great variety of habitat for the birder.

We’ll meet in the parking area at the main greenway entrance off Hwy 21 just south of Charlotte at 8 AM. There is a $2 per person use fee for the greenway. Some of the paths can be a little muddy so wear appropriate footwear.

If going, contact Dave Lovett at birdsalot@webtv.net or call 704-507-7677.

Saturday - September 16, 2006
Jackson Park, Hendersonville, NC - Full Day Field Trip

You may have heard about how fabulous spring migration is in Central Park, NYC. Well Jackson Park in Hendersonville, NC is a close rival, especially in the fall. In past years birds were dripping off the trees. Hopefully, we will hit one of its wonderful waves of warblers and if the birding gods are smiling on us we may run into something as exciting as a Philadelphia Vireo or Mourning Warbler.

We will meet at 7:30 AM at the McDonalds on Four Seasons Blvd. (Exit 49 off I-26). It’s on the right as you are heading into Hendersonville. Rt. 74 makes this a quick two-hour drive from Charlotte if you plan to drive out in the Saturday AM.

If you are interested in this trip, contact Judy Walker at 704-537-8181 or birdwalker@mac.com. For information about local hotels go to meckbirds.org/trips/fieldtrips1.htm
Saturday - September 23, 2006
RibbonWalk Nature Preserve- ½ Day Field Trip

With over 192 acres of natural woodlands, comprising the southern end of Nevin Park, RibbonWalk Nature Preserve lies largely untouched and unnoticed just minutes away from downtown Charlotte, NC. It is a woodland oasis in the heart of the city of Charlotte. The forest includes woodland and wetland habitat with several miles of nature trails and a variety of native flora and fauna. An extraordinary grove of old-age beech trees designated as a “treasure tree grove” stands out a one of the most impressive features of the forest. There are also picturesque mature pines, flowering trees and other native hardwoods. Wetland features include several ponds and meandering streams. Native wildflowers dot the forest floor.

Fall migration should be at its peak, so anything could show up. Last year we had a flock of Golden-winged Warblers and in a previous fall we had a Mourning Warbler.

We will meet at 7:30 AM at the entrance to the forest. If you plan to join the group, contact Ron Clark at 704-866-0811 [home] or 704-866-9495 [shop] or waxwing@bellsouth.net

Tuesday - September 26, 2006
Lower McAlpine Creek Greenway - ½ Day Field Trip

Lower McAlpine Creek Greenway in south Charlotte has always been a good spot for fall birding. We will try for southern moving water thrushes, warblers, and yellow-bellied flycatchers along the creek and the adjoining floodplain.

Join us at 8 AM for an easy walk along the paved greenway. If going, contact John Buckman at LinBuckman@Aol.com or call him at 704-541-7433.

Directions: From I-485 take Johnston Road North exit. Go north on Johnston over McAlpine Creek bridge to Carmel Rd.; turn left on Carmel; then left onto Harrowfield [1st street on left]; go to the end; turn right on Shandon Circle and park in the cul-de-sac. The greenway entrance is on the left.

Saturday - September 30, 2006
Squirrel Lake Park, Matthews, NC - ½ Day Field Trip

Squirrel Lake Park is a newly discovered gem tucked away in Matthews. Folks in the neighborhood have worked very hard to make the park hospitable to wildlife (especially birds), which has resulted in the park being certified by the National Wildlife Federation. Andrew Owens recently moved in around the corner from the park and would love to introduce you this new area. She’s also scouting out a few other areas nearby for us to explore.

So meet her at 8 AM in at the park. If you plan to go, let Andrea know you are coming by calling 704-651-2232 or email her at andreaowens1@yahoo.com.

Saturday - October 7, 2006
Huntington Beach State Park, Murrell’s Inlet, SC - Full Day Field Trip.

This is our fall sojourn to a South Carolina birding hot spot. Fall migrants – hawks and warblers – will still be moving through, wintering shorebirds will have settled in and a few ducks may also have begun arriving. This is probably one of the best times of the year to Peregrine Falcons and Merlins, and I am sure we will be delighted with spectacle views of hundreds if not thousands of tree swallows. Best of all, most of the people have moved out! It is a wonderful time of year to be on the beach.

We will meet in the parking lot on the eastside of the causeway at 7:30 AM. It can get pretty hot so remember a hat, sunscreen and plenty of water. We will eat lunch in the park so you will need to bring food.

Since most participants stay for the weekend, we usually go out to dinner on Saturday night. At dinner we will plan where we will go on Sunday.

If you plan to go, contact Judy Walker at 704-537-8181 or birdwalker@mac.com.
The Holy Grail Bird

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) is one of the largest woodpecker species in the world. The largest is the closely related Imperial Woodpecker (*C. imperialis*) of western Mexico, another rare species, which is very likely to be extinct. The Ivory-billed measures from 48 to 53 cm (19 to 21 in) in length and 450 to 570 g (1.0 to 1.25 lb) in weight, with short legs and feet ending in large, curved claws.

The bird is shiny blue-black with extensive white markings on its neck and on both the upper and lower trailing edges of its wings. It has a pure white bill and displays a prominent top crest, red in the male and black in the female. These characteristics distinguish it from the darker-billed Pileated Woodpecker. Like all woodpeckers, it has a strong and straight chisel-like bill and a long, mobile, hard-tipped, barbed tongue. Its drum is a single or double rap, and its alarm call, a kent or hant, sounds like a toy trumpet repeated in a series or as a double note.

Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are known to prefer thick hardwood swamps and pine forests, with large amounts of dead and decaying trees. Prior to the American Civil War, much of the Southern United States was covered in vast tracts of primeval hardwood forests that were suitable as habitat for the bird. At that time, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker ranged from east Texas to North Carolina, and from southern Illinois to Florida and Cuba. After the Civil War, the timber industry deforested millions of acres in the South, leaving only sparse isolated tracts of suitable habitat.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker feeds mainly on the larvae of wood-boring beetles, but also eats seeds, fruit, and other insects. The bird uses its enormous white bill to hammer, wedge, and peel the bark off dead trees to find the insects. Surprisingly, these birds need about 25 km² (10 square miles) per pair so they can find enough food to feed their young and themselves. Hence, they occur at low densities even in healthy populations. The more common Pileated Woodpecker may compete for food with this species.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is thought to pair for life. Pairs are also known to travel together. These paired birds will mate every year between January and May. Before they have their young, they excavate a nest in a dead or partially dead tree about 8–15 m up from the ground. Usually two to five eggs are laid and incubated for 3 to 5 weeks. Both parents sit on the eggs and are involved in taking care of the chicks, with the male taking sole responsibility at night. They feed the chicks for months. About five weeks after the young are born, they learn to fly. Even after the young are able to fly, the parents will continue feeding them for another two months. The family will eventually split up in late fall or early winter.


A Few Interesting Facts

- The Cuban form of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker was considered a separate species at one time. It closely resembled the bird from the United States, but it had a slightly smaller bill and the white neck stripes extended farther onto the face. It suffered the same fate as the mainland form, disappearing as the mature forests were destroyed. The last confirmed sighting was made in 1986. Some may still persist in southeastern Cuba, but it may be extinct.

- The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is very similar to the larger and very closely related Imperial Woodpecker of Mexico. The Imperial Woodpecker, the largest woodpecker in the world, lacked the white neck stripes and had a longer, thinner crest. It was a bird of mature pine forests, and also is likely extinct.

- Bills of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker were used as decorations by Native Americans and a thriving trade in them existed across much of North America. The presence of Ivory-billed Woodpecker skulls in excavations of archaeological sites outside of the known range of the woodpecker show the extent of the trade and not an ancient range for the species.

- The name Campephilus means “lover of grubs” - an allusion to the diet of these birds, many of which feed on the larvae of wood-boring beetles.
NASA Assists Search for Woodpecker Thought to be Extinct

Unlike its more famous cartoon cousin Woody the Woodpecker, the ivory-billed woodpecker is thought to be extinct, or so most experts have believed for over half a century.

But last month scientists from NASA and the University of Maryland, College Park, Md., launched a project to identify possible areas where the woodpecker might be living. Finding these habitat areas will guide future searches for the bird and help determine if it is really extinct or has survived an elusive existence.

The question of whether the species still exists started when a kayaker reported spotting the woodpecker along Arkansas’ Cache River in 2004. That sighting spawned an intensive search for the species by wildlife conservationists, bird watchers, field biologists and others.

In June a research aircraft flew over delta regions of the lower Mississippi River to track possible areas of habitat suitable for the ivory-billed woodpecker, one of the largest and most regal members of the woodpecker family. The project is supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey.

Scientists from NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Md., and the University of Maryland used NASA’s Laser Vegetation Imaging Sensor (LVIS) onboard the aircraft. The instrument uses lasers that send pulses of energy to the Earth’s surface. Photons of light from the lasers bounce off leaves, branches and the ground and reflect back to the instrument. By analyzing these returned signals, scientists receive a direct measurement of the height of the forest’s leaf covered tree tops, the ground level below and everything in between.

“LVIS is aiding this search effort far beyond what aircraft photos or satellite images can provide in the way of just a two-dimensional rendering of what’s below,” said Woody Turner, Program Scientist at NASA Headquarters, Washington, D.C. “The laser technology gives us the third dimension, enabling us to better assess the complex vegetation structure the plane flies over.” The flights are the latest step in an effort spanning over two years to find absolute evidence that a bird once thought extinct continues to survive.

“We’re trying to understand the environment where these birds live or used to live, using LVIS-plotted features like thickness of the ground vegetation and tree-leaf density, in combination with other factors like closeness to water and age of the forest, to determine where we might find them,” said Turner.

“Through numerous studies, we have shown the effectiveness of the data generated by this sensor for many scientific uses, including carbon removal, fire prediction, and habitat identification,” said LVIS project researcher Ralph Dubayah, a professor in the University of Maryland’s Department of Geography. “Lidar technology like LVIS measures the vertical structure of the trees and ground, setting it apart from other remote-sensing systems that provide detailed horizontal information that tells us little about whether a green patch of forest is short or tall, for example. When identifying habitats, the vertical structure of the vegetation is of paramount importance to many species, including a bird like the ivory-bill.”

The reported sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker inspired a year-long search by more than 50 experts working together as part of the Big Woods Conservation Partnership, led by the Cornell University’s Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and the Nature Conservancy. Researchers have followed reported sightings across a huge swath of the southeastern United States, including the Gulf Coast, Alabama, and Florida.

In April 2005, that team published a report in the journal Science that at least one male ivory-bill still survived. However, some scientists have challenged whether it really was the ivory-billed woodpecker that was spotted. The NASA-University of Maryland project is designed to provide detailed habitat information that search teams will use beginning this fall for expanded efforts to find new evidence about the possible survival of the bird.

The project also has a broader application, according to NASA Goddard’s Bryan Blair, principal investigator for the project. “This field campaign is part of an effort to develop approaches that bring together many types of remote-sensing data for monitoring wildlife habitat.”

The research team previously used NASA’s LVIS to study wildlife habitats in old-growth forests in the western United States and rain forests abroad.
WOW - Where can you …

...find areas with a combined bird list of nearly 400 species?
...experience ghost town birding?
...visit an ancient maritime with its rare ecosystem?
...explore a blackwater swamp?
...wade in search of Clapper Rails, marsh sparrows and wrens?
...head for the blue waters of the Gulf Stream?
...experience a Red Wolves howling?

Where else but the North Carolina Outer Banks? Take a Walk on the Wild Side at this 10th annual Wings Over Water (WOW) birding and wildlife festival November 7-12, 2006. WOW offers programs for the amateur-to-serious birder, nature enthusiast, wildlife photographer, paddler, angler, and others who enjoy being up close with nature.

Autumn is a special time in Eastern North Carolina. The frantic summer tourist season is well past, and the land and water are left to those who wish to blend with nature. Wings Over Water will be your opportunity to enter this land of wildlife enchantment. Through field trips, workshops and interpretive programs, you will explore one of the most fascinating ecological settings in the United States.

Is It Time to Renew Your Local Membership?

If you want to receive the MAS monthly newsletter, you need to be a local member. Check the expiration date on your address label. If your membership has lapsed, this is the only newsletter you will receive for the year. Contact Lucy Quintilliano if you have a question.

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Join now and your membership will be effective until June 2007.

Because National Audubon has reduced the chapter share of the national membership, Mecklenburg Audubon now must offer a Local Membership to cover the cost of the newsletter, web site & cost of meetings.

Name

Phone

Address [Street, City, ST, and Zip]

E-mail

☐ Please, save trees and send me[us] the newsletter electronically.
☐ Please, add me to Meckbirds, the local electronic discussion list about birds and the environment.
☐ I[we] would be willing to lead a field trip.
☐ I[we] would be interested in participating in a work day at one of the local preserves.
☐ I[we] would be willing to do a program.

Return to: Lucy Quintilliano, Treasurer, Mecklenburg Audubon Society, P. O. Box 221093, Charlotte, NC 28222
A SWIFT NIGHT OUT!

A SWIFT NIGHT OUT is a continent-wide effort to raise awareness about and encourage interest in Chimney Swifts and Vaux’s Swifts. The project was originally inspired by John Connors with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh, North Carolina.

As summer draws to a close and the swifts have finished raising their young, these fascinating aerial acrobats begin to congregate in communal roosts prior to their migration in the fall. Some roosts may consist of an extended family group of a half a dozen birds or so, but the larger sites can host hundreds or even thousands of swifts! We encourage you to involve your local Audubon chapters, bird clubs, scout groups and neighbors in this exhilarating spectacle.

Here is how it works: Keep your eyes to the skies at dusk in late July and watch for areas where swifts are feeding. Look for a tall shaft, chimney or similar structure to locate where Chimney Swifts (central to east coast) or Vaux’s Swift (Pacific coast) go to roost in your area.

This year, on one night over the weekend of Aug. 11, 12, 13, and/or Sept. 8, 9, 10 observe the roost starting about 30 minutes before dusk and estimate the number of swifts that enter. When you have your number, contact us with your results. That’s all there is to it!

Please record the following information and send it to dwa@austin.rr.com: date; location (address; city, state); number of swifts counted; time (and time zone); general description of the site, e.g. school, warehouse, residence, Chimney Swift Tower, etc.; and weather conditions may also be reported.

For more information go to www.chimneyswifts.org

Mercury and Birds

While preparing the toxicology section of the Osprey account for the Birds of North America project Rob Bierregaard discovered an interesting fact about birds and mercury. Birds put about 80-90% of the mercury in their bodies into their feathers each year as they molt. This means that mercury doesn’t accumulate in their bodies and hence doesn’t pose a serious threat unless they’re exposed to really high levels. It’s nothing like the danger of DDT and DDE which accumulate in fatty tissues.

Lead is also not a problem with raptors because it is deposited in bones, which are not digested, and thus it doesn’t “bioaccumulate” up the food chain. Ospreys have very high reproductive success on the Coeur d’Alene River in Idaho, where there are very high levels of lead in the aquatic ecosystem. In the same system, waterfowl, on the other hand, do very poorly as they ingest large amounts of lead while grazing on aquatic vegetation.

As of May 1, 2006, there are 1,868 species worldwide as endangered or threatened, of which 1,300 occur in the U.S. North Carolina is home to at least 30. The new North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan [www.ncwildlife.org/fs_index_07_conservation.htm] describes conservation actions that are being taken to prevent these critters from further decline.

“This publication is the culmination of three years of effort among numerous state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, academics, industry professional and dedicated individuals. It provides a “blueprint” for conserving fish and wildlife species and their habitats, from the mountains of the Southern Blue Ridge to the marine habitats along the coast.” - Richard B. Hamilton, Executive Director of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.
Audubon News
A Publication of Mecklenburg Audubon
P.O. Box 221093
Charlotte, NC 28222

Special Location for Meeting
Thursday, Sept. 7, 2006, 7:30 PM
Conference Center
William R. Davie Park
4635 Pineville-Matthews Rd.

Activities Calendar

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Who’s New?
Pat & Bob Baum
Mark & Rebecca Greenspan
Sam & Kathy Harp
Cary Ellen Howie
Mike & Katie Knapp
Fran Thomas
Ann Hardin
Dennis Kent
Jamie Tamasek-Kent
Carol Staggs-Kent
Shirley Diane Stanley