

Did I See an Ivory-billed Woodpecker?¹

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Introduction

This publication describes how to differentiate between two species of large woodpeckers—the Pileated Woodpecker and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. The existence of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) is highly debated, and our goal in this publication is not to end the ongoing debate about the existence or extinction of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, sometimes referred to as “Lord God Bird.” Rather, we hope to educate novice birdwatchers on the differences between this species and the similar-looking and still common Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*). We also encourage people to report sightings of large woodpeckers (with photographic evidence) on the popular citizen-science platform [iNaturalist](#). Additionally, we provide a brief background on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and the ongoing debate about its possible presence in the Southeast. Our specific target audience is casual birdwatchers who enjoy getting outdoors to observe nature, and we endeavor to address their curiosity about potentially seeing an Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

Bird watching is one of the most popular ways people experience the outdoors. Be it watching birds that come to backyard feeders, visiting local nature parks and natural areas, or seeking out remote regions of pristine forest, anyone can quickly learn to identify the more common species with a pair of binoculars and a field guide (printed or electronic). And unlike other groups of vertebrates (e.g., reptiles, amphibians, mammals), one can always count on finding birds in just about any location and at any time. It’s even possible for a novice birder to encounter a rare and elusive bird.

Some 700 species of birds regularly breed in the United States and Canada. Bird biologists (aka ornithologists) organize these species into about 20 major groups, referred to as Orders (see [All About Birds](#), Cornell Lab of Ornithology). They include, for example, ducks (Order Anseriformes), owls (Order Strigiformes) and the species-rich songbirds (aka perching birds) of the Order Passeriformes, among others. Also found in North America are birds of the Order Piciformes, which includes species of the family Picidae—the woodpeckers. According to *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (Sibley 2000), there are 22 species of woodpeckers living in the United States and Canada today.

However, conspicuously absent from the woodpecker species accounts in Sibley’s guide is the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the largest of the woodpeckers north of Mexico.

As we describe below, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker once inhabited old-growth forest in much of the southeastern United States but experienced a major decline in its population due to habitat loss. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the species as endangered in 1967 and is currently considering declaring the bird extinct. A subspecies of Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis bairdii*) is known from Cuba, and is now likely extinct as well, but in this publication we focus on the southeastern United States.

Despite its possible extinction and definite rarity, people still occasionally report seeing an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, and several scientific publications in the last 20 or so years have claimed that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers persist in dense forests of Arkansas (Fitzpatrick et al. 2005), Florida (Hill et al. 2006), and Louisiana (Latta et al. 2023). The dispute remains active in popular culture and the scientific community alike, with some scientists pointing out the lack of conclusive evidence in these publications (Troy and Jones 2023) and several claiming that recent photographs and videos that supposedly show Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are most likely Pileated Woodpeckers, instead (Sibley et al. 2006; Collinson 2007; Michalak 2024), but others disagree (Collins 2025).

Woodpecker Biodiversity in the United States

As noted above, about 20 species of woodpeckers currently occur in the United States. They are medium-sized birds, and most are about eight to nine inches long. The smallest (about 6 3/4 inches) is the Downy Woodpecker, and the largest is the Pileated Woodpecker (in excess of approximately 16 inches); the Ivory-billed Woodpecker was even larger at approximately 20 inches. Most woodpeckers in the United States are boldly marked with black and white feathers, and adults of about 10 of the species have varying amounts of red coloration on their head and neck (Figure 1). Woodpeckers have four toes—two pointing forward and two pointing backwards

(zygodactyl toe arrangement)—and their tail feathers are stiff. They grip trees with their clawed toes and use their stiff tail feathers as a prop while they creep up trees and drill into the bark to search for insects. They extract prey insects with a long, barbed tongue, and some woodpeckers also eat fruits and nuts. In addition to foraging, woodpeckers use their strong, chisel-shaped beaks to rapidly drum out a sound to attract mates and proclaim territories, and to excavate cavities (holes) in living and dead trees in which they nest and sleep. Most species use a tree cavity for only one year and then abandon it to excavate a new one. Other species of birds and some mammals will then use the cavities, so woodpeckers play an important ecological role in creating habitat for other species.



Figure 1. Most woodpeckers in the United States are boldly marked with black and white feathers, and adults often have varying amounts of red coloration on their head and neck. Adults (male and female) of the aptly named Red-headed Woodpecker have an entirely red head.

Credit: Steve A. Johnson, UF/IFAS

Ivory-billed Woodpecker Background

Historically, Ivory-billed Woodpeckers occurred throughout much of the American Southeast from Texas to North Carolina and north along the Mississippi Valley into Oklahoma, Missouri, and parts of Indiana and Illinois (Allen and Kellogg 1937). Wide-scale cutting of virgin forest in the 1800s and killing of birds by professional collectors led to a drastic decline in their numbers. By the early 1900s, Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were quite rare and thought to be “confined to a few isolated portions of Florida, and possibly, Indian Territory” (Reed 1925). In fact, in 1939, James T. Tanner estimated that only about 25 Ivory-billed Woodpeckers remained in the United States.

At the time, Tanner was a graduate student at Cornell University studying the species for his Ph.D. degree. The last unequivocal sighting of a wild Ivory-billed Woodpecker was in 1944 in the Tensas River region of northeast Louisiana in a swamp forest known as the Singer Tract (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Despite reports of Ivory-billed Woodpecker sightings in the decades following the last confirmed observation at the Singer Tract (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2010), no irrefutable evidence of the species’ continued existence has yet emerged.

However, in early 2004 a naturalist named Gene Sparling, just back from a kayaking trip in remote eastern Arkansas, reported on the internet his encounter with an especially large, red-crested woodpecker in the Big Woods—he strongly suspected he saw an Ivory-billed Woodpecker and not the slightly smaller and common Pileated Woodpecker. Tim Gallagher (a wildlife photographer from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology) and Bobby Harrison (a college professor from Oakwood College in Alabama), both Ivory-billed Woodpecker enthusiasts, learned of the report, and Sparling agreed to take them to the place where he saw the bird.

In an almost unbelievable streak of good fortune, a short while later they were paddling their canoe near the location where Sparling had seen the bird when a large woodpecker they were sure was an Ivory-billed flew directly in front of them in full view. What ensued was a monumental effort by numerous people spearheaded by Dr. John W. Fitzpatrick, Director of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, to collect additional evidence documenting Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. Thousands of person-hours were spent searching for the bird and numerous audio recorders were deployed in an attempt to detect the distinctive, squeaky “kent” calls and other sounds of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. In June of 2005, Fitzpatrick and colleagues published the results of their efforts in the prestigious scientific journal *Science*. In the article, they provide several lines of evidence (e.g., human observations, audio recordings, video footage) that, as indicated by the article’s title, the “Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) Persists in Continental North America” (Fitzpatrick et al. 2005). The main piece of evidence upon which they base their claim is a brief, grainy video (dubbed the “Luneau video”) showing a large woodpecker flying away from the camera—the bird’s wings and back are only visible for about five seconds. As would be expected, their report garnered a tremendous amount of attention in the media, possibly the most prominent of which was a TV story, “The Lord God Bird,” which appeared in primetime on the show *60 Minutes* in October of 2005.

No doubt encouraged by the findings of the Cornell team, a small group of scientists from Auburn University report that they have seen an Ivory-billed Woodpecker on

numerous occasions in a swamp forest along the Choctawhatchee River in the Florida Panhandle. In their 2006 publication, they present evidence based on those observations, including sound recordings, signs of foraging, and measurements of tree cavities they claim provide evidence the species has persisted in Florida as well (Hill et al. 2006). And, as recently as 2022, another team of researchers presented similar evidence collected over a 10-year period they claim supports the notion that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers persist in Louisiana (Latta et al. 2023). However, a critical piece of evidence lacking in each of these studies is the proverbial “smoking gun”: no indisputable photo or video clearly showing an Ivory-billed Woodpecker has yet materialized. Interestingly, of the 14 firsthand observations reported in Florida (in addition to numerous trail-camera images and a drone video), the 16 reported observations in Louisiana, and the “Luneau” video from Arkansas, only one observation includes mention of the namesake white beak of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. And that observation, initially made by Frank Wiley on April 3, 2015, was written for the Latta et al. (2023) study by another member of the team because Wiley had since died. More details about the search for the bird can be found on the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website on their page [The Search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker](#).

Understandably, skeptics have strongly debated the existence of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers and have argued that observations and other evidence (e.g., foraging sign and tree cavities) are misidentifications of the common, and similar-looking, Pileated Woodpecker (Collinson 2007; Sibley et al. 2006; Michalak 2024). Nonetheless, the information in the three studies cited earlier makes a compelling argument that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers did recently, and may still, persist in some areas of their historical range. Thus, we argue that amateur naturalists should continue to stay vigilant and report credible, evidence-based observations of large woodpeckers in the Southeast.

Identifying Pileated and Ivory-billed Woodpeckers

Pileated and Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are among the largest woodpeckers in the world and are the largest woodpeckers by far in the southeastern United States. They are black and white and have a prominent crest of feathers on their heads. Male and female Pileated Woodpeckers have red on their crests, but only the male Ivory-billed has red crest feathers—the crest of the female is black. Both species have a white stripe that extends from each cheek down the neck (Figure 2).

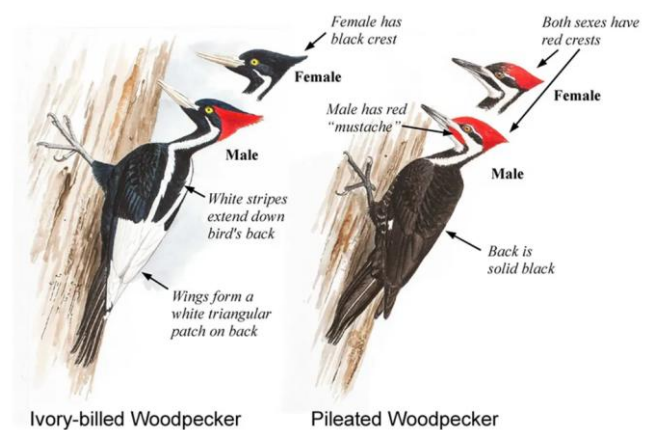


Figure 2. Comparison of perched Ivory-billed Woodpecker (at left) and Pileated Woodpecker (at right).

Credit: N. John Schmitt, used with permission

Adult Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are approximately 19 to 20 inches long and are slightly larger than the similar looking Pileated. As their name implies, they have a prominent white beak. When an Ivory-billed Woodpecker is perched on a tree with its wings folded against the body, two white stripes are clearly visible on the back extending to the rump. These are extensions of the white cheek stripes. There is also a large, triangular white patch on the lower back of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker created by the white trailing ends of the wing feathers. As noted above, both sexes have a prominent head crest that is red in the male and black in the female. In flight, the trailing edges of the wings are white when viewed from above and below the bird (Figure 3).

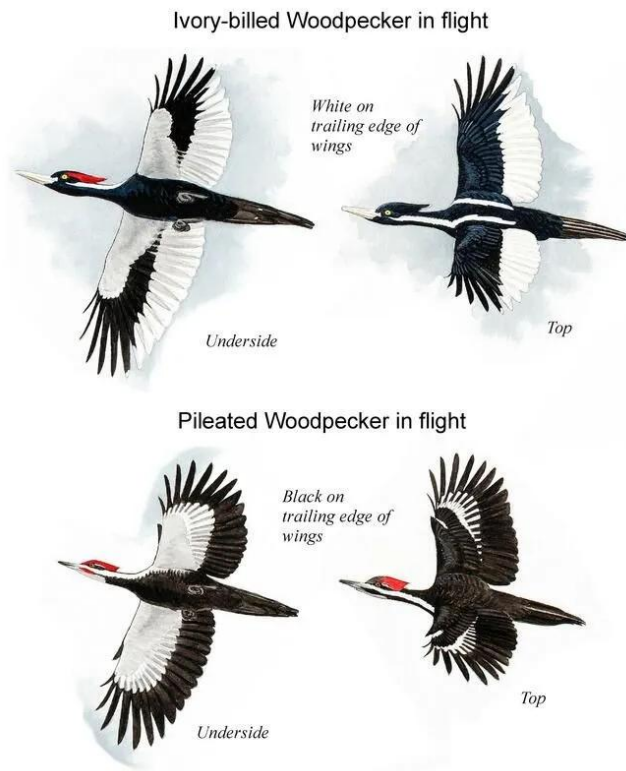


Figure 3. Comparison of Ivory-billed Woodpecker (above) and Pileated Woodpecker (below) in flight. Credit: N. John Schmitt, used with permission

Adult Pileated Woodpeckers are approximately 16 to 19 inches long, or about the size of a crow. The beak of a Pileated Woodpecker is gray with a dark tip. When the bird is perched with folded wings, a white stripe extends from each cheek down the neck. But unlike in the Ivory-billed, the stripe does not extend onto the back. Also, when perched, in contrast to an Ivory-billed, the back of a Pileated is solid black (Figure 2). Adults of both sexes of the Pileated have a prominent red crest, and the male also has a red “mustache” on its chin. In flight, the trailing edge of the Pileated’s wings are black, not white, when viewed from above and below the bird (Figure 3).

Both species excavate large cavities in dead trees or large dead limbs of living trees. And they both use their strong beaks to excavate for insects in dead wood. Pileated Woodpeckers are renowned for tearing apart dead trees and stumps (Figure 4), whereas Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are known for scaling (peeling) bark from recently dead trees.



Figure 4. Pileated Woodpeckers are known for tearing apart stumps and dead trees to feed on insects, especially carpenter ants. Credit: Steve A. Johnson, UF/IFAS

Both species also make distinct, and quite different, vocalizations. The vocalization of the Ivory-billed, known from just a single audio recording from 1935, has been compared to the squeak of a clarinet or tin horn, and is often referred to as a “kent” or “kint” call. In contrast, the vocalization of a Pileated is a series of loud, repeated chattering notes.

The range (distribution) of the Pileated Woodpecker is much larger than the presumed range of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and includes the entire southeastern United States, where the two species overlap. Both prefer areas of dense hardwoods and mixed hardwood-pine forests. All reports of suspected Ivory-billed Woodpeckers during the past 20 or so years have come from remote areas in mature swamp forests. Pileated Woodpeckers inhabit such areas as well but are also relatively common in forested neighborhoods. For example, in Gainesville, Florida, Pileated Woodpeckers are regularly seen in wooded neighborhoods (Pegg et al. 2024).

So, did I see an Ivory-billed Woodpecker?

If you live in a suburban neighborhood and observe a large woodpecker in your yard or nearby, you certainly did not

see an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. In all likelihood, any large, crested woodpecker seen in the wild in the southeastern United States is the Pileated Woodpecker. Nonetheless, as the ongoing debate in the scientific community continues and as the popularity of the Facebook page “The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker—Rediscovered” attests (21.4K members as of June 2025), some people believe the “Lord God Bird” still persists deep within a swamp forest in some remote and largely inaccessible regions of the Southeast. So, if you find yourself in a remote swamp forest, keep your camera and audio recording device (e.g., cell phone on video mode) at the ready. Unfortunately, until irrefutable evidence (e.g., a clear, distinct, unequivocal image of the bird) is made public, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker will sadly be considered extinct and only alive in the imaginations (at least for now) of the hopeful birders who, with good reason, refuse to let this magnificent bird slip into oblivion.

Reporting Observations of Large Woodpeckers

Even though it’s exceedingly unlikely that a casual birdwatcher will be reporting a credible observation of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker (but you never know), we encourage reports of Pileated Woodpeckers and other wildlife observed during time outdoors—even common birds encountered at backyard feeders. Although focused on butterflies, the UF/IFAS Extension publication “[Brilliant Butterflies: A Guide to Spotting, Observing and Sharing Sightings on iNaturalist](#)” provides easy-to-understand guidance on observing and photographing butterflies and reporting these observations to iNaturalist. Lessons learned here can easily be transferred to observing and reporting bird observations. So why not grab your binoculars and a camera and head into a swamp forest to see if you can document some large woodpeckers?

Additional Information

Online Resources

60 Minutes Archive video—[The Lord God Bird](#)

Cornell Lab of Ornithology—[All About Birds guide](#)

Cornell Lab of Ornithology—[All About Birds Ivory-billed Woodpecker page](#)

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission—[Ivory-billed Woodpecker \(*Campephilus principalis*\) page](#)

iNaturalist: A Community for Naturalists
<https://www.inaturalist.org/>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—[FWS's Ivory-billed Woodpecker page](#)

Field Guides and Books

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