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In April the environmental community received a real surprise – the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, long thought to be extinct, had apparently been rediscovered in Arkansas! As the news unfolded, the world learned that a team of researchers had been tracking at least one woodpecker, a lone male, for more than a year in the Cache River region of east-central Arkansas. The rediscovery of a bird presumed extinct for more than 60 years subsequently galvanized the environmental community and garnered much-needed support for the preservation of the Southeast’s remaining old growth bottomland forests and endangered species recovery.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker was once a widespread bird in the southeastern U.S., its breeding range stretching from the Gulf Coast north to southeastern Missouri, southern Illinois, and North Carolina; it also occurred in Cuba. Closer to home, the woodpecker was a resident throughout much of Mississippi, but disappeared before 1900. Although the historical record is scant, they were historically resident along the Mississippi River floodplain and in more mature forests throughout the remainder of the state.

As the news of an Ivory-bills existence unfolded, I thought about the possibility that the bird might yet reside somewhere in Mississippi. Could it be possible that a few were hidden in one the state’s remaining large tracts of bottomland forest, say along the Lower Pascagoula River? Other than the well-publicized search of the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area of Louisiana in 2002, there have been few concerted searches for the woodpecker in Mississippi. Most recently, in the early 1990s the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinated a search for the woodpecker in the remaining suitable tracts of forest in Mississippi and throughout the Southeast, but the search turned up no reliable sightings or other evidence of the species’ presence.

So, could the Ivory-billed Woodpecker still persist in Mississippi? Sadly, it’s not very likely, in my opinion. Ivory-bills are generally thought to require old growth forests to survive, in part because of their preference for insects that inhabit dead and dying trees. They are also a long-lived bird with a territory of as much as six square miles. What this means is that they require large tracts of old growth forest, something that disappeared in Mississippi soon after settlement. While some impressive forest stands remain in the state, none is large enough to support a population of Ivory-bills, and the fragmented and patchy distribution is also unfavorable for the woodpecker.
It seems highly improbable that such a large and seemingly conspicuous bird could have escaped detection in Mississippi for more than half a century, and yet maintained sufficient numbers to survive. Despite its long-lived nature (some may live as long as 20 years), there would have to be more than just a few individuals occupying an area for the species to persist – the sex ratio would have to be balanced so that individuals could easily find a mate, a minimum number of individuals may be necessary to protect the population from threats such as disease and environmental disasters (e.g., a hurricane), and genetic inbreeding could be a problem for a very small population. Aside from these arguments, the last firmly documented evidence for this species was from Cuba in 1948; in the U.S. the species was last photographed in Louisiana in 1943. With all the advances in photography and the increasing popularity of bird watching, I find it highly unlikely that this species could have escaped detection in Mississippi. Not surprisingly, the recent sightings in Arkansas come from one of the last great expanses of old growth bottomland forest in the U.S., and are exactly the type of place where this magnificent bird could persist.

What does the future hold for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker? With only a single individual located during the extensive searches, the future is dim. And even if more birds are discovered, intensive forest management efforts will be needed to give the species even the slimmest chance of persisting. And maybe, just maybe, if the species does persist and reforestation efforts continue in the Delta region of Mississippi, our descendants may see the return of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker to Mississippi.