Not only did this famous woodpecker call our southern forests home, some of us still hope for its return.

The Ivory-Billed in Illinois

Story By Joe McFarland

It's not every day an extinct species returns to life. Yet, one day in 1985, my college roommate burst into our dormitory hall to announce he'd spotted an ivory-billed woodpecker near campus lake at Southern Illinois University.

"Ha!" was everybody's unanimous reply. The rest of us, regardless of our major, knew ivory-billed woodpeckers (*Campephilus principalis*) were believed to be extinct. We knew there had not been a confirmed ivory-billed sighting for more than 50 years—and that sighting was made far from Illinois, in a Florida swamp. Despite Gary's insistence to the contrary, none of us was willing to believe an ivory-billed woodpecker miraculously survived (undetected until that day) on the campus of an Illinois university.

Gary's eyesight, it should be noted, was far from good. His usual greeting whenever anybody walked into his room was to ask, "Who's there?" Gary lived in a world of inscrutable images. Nonetheless, he was determined to make birdwatching history.

As improbable coincidence would have it, on the following day a Chicago newspaper carried a bold report from Cuba where a scientist claimed he saw the very bird which hadn't been confirmed alive since the 1930s.

"See?" Gary taunted us before cutting out the article and taping it to his hall door. Naturally, his paper-thin supporting evidence didn't convince anyone. What Gary actually saw, we assumed, was a pileated woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), a large, North American woodpecker roughly similar in basic appearances to the fabled ivory-billed. Pileated woodpeckers are reasonably common in southern Illinois, including on the campus of SIU.

Yet Gary wasn't alone in his campaign to resurrect the ivory-billed woodpecker, and he certainly wasn't the last person to claim a sighting of this national mascot for rare birds.

The fact is, ivory-billed woodpecker sightings pop up every decade or so, most recently in Arkansas in 2005 and Florida in 2006. While ornithologists

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

A pair of ivory-billed woodpeckers from the collection of the Illinois Natural History Survey.

(Photo by Jay Zimmerman.)

Cypress and tupelo swamp habitat in extreme southern Illinois would have been suitable habitat for the ivory-billed woodpecker.

haven't been able to prove the swamp-forest inhabitant still exists anywhere on earth, the Arkansas and Florida sightings and Gary's SIU sighting actually have something perfectly legitimate in common: All occurred within the known range of one of America's best-known "extinct" species.

Illinois was once home to the ivory-billed woodpecker—if only barely—according to historical records. Famed naturalist John James Audubon reported seeing the bird in 1825 at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers where cypress and tupelo swamps would have provided needed refuge for America's largest woodpecker. Scientists Robert Ridgway and Benjamin Gault also recalled ivory-billed encounters in southern Illinois during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Additionally, while the known habitat for the ivory-billed woodpecker doesn't exist north of extreme southern Illinois, archaeological evidence near St. Louis suggests the bird might once have occurred that far north.

"Historically, we know they were found in large, typically mature bottomland forests," explained Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge Manager Dennis Sharp. At the 15,000-acre southern Illinois refuge where Sharp oversees operations, visitor interest in the ivory-billed is as high as it's ever been. "You go to anyplace that has bottomland hardwood forests now and somebody is trying to find the ivory-billed," Sharp said.

Within the Cache River wetlands complex of southern Illinois, habitat includes reforested hardwood, cypress and tupelo swamps, plus tiny remnants of the original habitat once common during the era of Audubon.

"Unfortunately, much of that habitat today has been cleared or cut-over two and three times," Sharp added.

But lack of ideal ivory-billed habitat isn't dampening some people's dreams for a southern Illinois resurrection. As the Cache River watershed undergoes massive ecological rehabilitation through public and private land management partnerships, some birders are casting a wishful eye toward a future habitat goal—one which includes exactly the kind of forest the ivory-billed woodpecker required for its survival.

"We like to say it's within the realm of possibility," suggested Rhonda Rothrock, a Southern Illinois Audubon Society member who's not quite ready to give up hope the bird still exists. "If it turns out a few of them managed to survive, we like to think the habitat around the Cache River could support a population someday."

Sharp points out the attention focused on the fabled bird in recent years will have a lasting benefit to the conservation movement, even if the ivory-billed woodpecker is never again found alive.

"It's kind of renewed interest in how valuable these bottomland hardwood systems are," Sharp said. "For years these forests were overlooked as a disposable resource. But, now, people are paying attention to the diversity of life these habitats once supported."