

WE DON'T GET NO RESPECT By James H. Phillips

I am waiting ...

And waiting ...

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For environmentalists and bird-watchers to acknowledge their enormous debt to waterfowlers, particularly the late Rex Hancock, a duck-hunting dentist from Stuttgart, Ark.

I am waiting because two months have elapsed since the announcement that the ivory-billed woodpecker was re-discovered in the bottomlands of the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas. Many thought the species extinct. The finding of at least one male ivory-bill in the flooded hardwoods marked the first confirmed sighting in more than 60 years.

Cornell University, The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others trumpeted the discovery. Newspapers and television networks gave the story prominent coverage, primarily focusing on the efforts of the search team from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology that first glimpsed and then captured video footage of the rare species.

Barely mentioned was the reason for the woodpecker's descent toward oblivion – the cutting of vast tracts of old-growth swamp timber that were home to “numerous dead and dying trees that produced beetle larvae, the ivory-bill's favorite food.” (The big woodpecker peels back bark to expose the larvae.)

The refuge's preservation of ancient trees along Bayou DeView apparently enabled the ivory-bill to find a plenitude of beetle larvae and maintain its precarious existence. There is considerable evidence of peeled bark on many old trees.

Yet, in all the self-serving accounts of the bird's re-discovery, no organization or search-team member pays tribute to those responsible for the preservation of the old-growth forest habitat.

Who are the “preservationists”? They are primarily duck hunters, most notably Hancock, the Arkansas dentist. He became the iconic chieftain of the epic 1970s conservation battle to defeat the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers attempt to channelize the

Cache River, an act of wanton despoliation that would have turned the ecologically-rich floodplain into a barren, muddy ditch.

When Hancock first engaged in the long political and legal battle, few believed the Arkansas conservationist and his allies could stop the Corps. But the stakes were too high for Hancock to entertain defeat. The Cache River floodplain was described in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan as the continent's most important mallard wintering area. It was recognized as a "Wetland of International Importance" by the RAMSAR Convention.

Hancock's resolve never wavered. He received an abundance of support from outraged, conservation-minded duck hunters, foresters, the National Wildlife Federation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others. Ultimately, they routed the "Rotten-to-the-Corps" forces. In 1986 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge that today encompasses approximately 55,000 acres of non-contiguous tracts along the Cache River, White River and Bayou DeView.

This history has been ignored by the bird-watching, environmental community. I have not seen a single mention by these folks that acknowledged or expressed gratitude for the duck-hunting community's pre-eminent contribution to the ivory-bill's survival, including the expenditure of duck-stamp money to acquire refuge lands.

This should come as no surprise. As many of us are all too aware, a majority of academics and professionals today routinely dismiss our observations. This is true whether we are talking about woodpeckers or ducks. We are Rodney Dangerfield naturalists – we "don't get no respect."

This became poignantly obvious while listening to a National Public Radio interview with a Cornell University search-team member who described the re-discovery of the ivory-bill. Hunters and fisherman had reported sighting the bird, he related, but these reports were dismissed. The search and sighting in Arkansas keyed on a tip from a "kayaker," an individual no doubt viewed as an eco-friendly environmentalist type.

This logic escapes me. Millions of outdoorsmen go afield each year, often exploring remote, nearly inaccessible areas in search of game and fish. Their numbers and days afield far exceed those of professional naturalists. Not all are tobacco-chewing, illiterate, country bumpkins. The odds suggest a hunter or angler will be the first to glimpse the rare and unknown.

The presumptive dismissal of lay observations is not a recent phenomenon. In the early 1970s as a reporter in Washington, D.C., I interviewed a Smithsonian Institution bird expert about the woodpecker's purported extinction, a story partly motivated by the fact that I always have been infatuated by sporadic reports of ivory-bill sightings. I wrote a story that was published in newspapers across the nation.

The biologist soon received hundreds of letters from individuals who reportedly had sighted the bird. Naturally, he dismissed wholesale every reported sighting. He

complained to me about the outpouring of letters. It meant he had to send a reply. He prepared and mailed a form-letter to everyone.

Dennis Widner, the refuge manager, said he too had dismissed reports from local outdoorsmen. To his credit, Widner said that “we are now reviewing old reports.” But he is an exception. In today’s world, advanced degrees and professional status trump real-world experience. Most academics and professionals will remain intellectually arrogant and woefully ignorant.

One wonders how these environmentalists would react to an individual named A. T. Wayne, a naturalist and gourmand who from 1892-94 shot and killed at least 44 ivory-bills in the Suwanee River region. He cooked and ate the birds, declaring them to taste “better than ducks.”

Would today’s professionals and academics deny that ivory-bills are – dare I say it? – *good eating*?

And so I wait ...

And wait ...

And wait ...

For the environmental and birding community to give credit where credit is due. A small measure of congratulation is due those who documented the re-discovery, but the most fulsome praise must accrue to duck-hunting conservationists like Rex Hancock and others who fought to preserve the hardwood bottomland that today has emerged as the lone redoubt of the imperiled ivory-bill.¹

¹ You may wonder what role Ducks Unlimited played in the preservation of the Cache River bottomlands. On the day the ivory-bill’s re-discovery was announced, DU executive vice president Don Young issued a statement saying, “The habitats these birds need are exactly the kind of habitats Ducks Unlimited restores and conserves. This is what DU and its partners do best.”

It is a shameless remark. When the Corps of Engineers held the continent’s most important mallard wintering grounds under siege, DU declined to join the battle. The organization refused to support the effort to save the hardwood bottomlands, Hancock told me. It rankled him. The organization’s refusal reportedly stemmed from the fact that several large DU benefactors stood to gain financially from the Corps project.

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.
