

East-central Louisiana Trip Report
November 12-20, 2010
by
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Summary

On a recent trip to Louisiana, I returned to our main search area on November 12-14 and 16-20 (on the latter dates I was joined by my wife, Patricia Johnson.) We spent November 15th at LSU's Museum of Natural Science in Baton Rouge, where we examined IBWO specimens to see how specimen bills might match with suspected bill marks on scaled bark from our search area and to compare IBWO and PIWO study skins with the hope that this would shed light on an inconclusive photograph obtained in March 2010. From November 16-20, we also visited several Wildlife Management Areas in east-central Louisiana to do quick assessments of habitat quality. While there were only a few indications of recent suspected Ivory-billed Woodpecker activity in our immediate search area, I had a possible sighting in Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area, approximately 9 miles east northeast of the private land that has been the focus of our efforts. Perhaps more importantly, I was able to collect a number of known and suspected PIWO chips, as well as a some suspected IBWO chips and believe I have made some headway in my effort to identify a narrow category of likely IBWO scaling based on a variety of factors including bark chip characteristics.

Project Coyote Primary Search Area: Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana

Frank Wiley sustained a severe injury to his foot and ankle in June of this year, so we have had very little presence on the property since that time. There are currently two Reconyx cameras in place, but there have been a few periods, totaling perhaps three weeks, during which the cameras were not operational. In recent months, the member of the landowning family who spends the most time in the woods has reported hearing double knocks on two occasions and has claimed one sighting. Because the search area has received little attention since late spring, I devoted much of my field time to searching for new foraging sign or fresh sign on suspected feeding trees, and new cavities. Foliage was still relatively dense, perhaps 70% of full leaf-out, and even Pileated Woodpeckers were difficult to see; I found only a little recent, suggestive scaling; I did not locate any fresh cavities; nor did we have any possible sightings or hear any sounds suggestive of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers.

I arrived early in the morning of Friday, November 12, 2010 and, by 8 am, heard loggers working near the property. Upon investigating, I learned that a lumber company that owns much neighboring acreage was in the process of doing a selective cut on land abutting our search area. Over an inch of rain fell between November 13 and 15th, and no logging took place during the week of the 15th. An additional, 1.72" of rain have fallen in the intervening two weeks, so conditions may not be conducive to further logging before spring.

The land in question is currently being managed for Louisiana black bears, so I can only hope that the impact of the logging will be minimal or perhaps even beneficial in the short run; the logging slash may provide a good food source for the next 12-24 months (or longer if logging operations have ceased for the winter,) and the disruption could conceivably lead to more ivorybill activity in our primary search area. This hopeful scenario is based in part on Stephen Lyn Bales's *Ghost Birds*, which reveals that Tanner observed ivorybills feeding on slash on several occasions and that the John's Bayou birds nested in a cutover area in 1937, and our own suspicions that scaling done in a small, recently logged section of our search area last year was the work of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. (Bales pp. 106-107. Thanks to David Martin for highlighting the point about nesting.)

We hope to begin a dialogue with the company, both to insure that the logging is done in as responsible a way as possible and to obtain permission to monitor the recently logged areas. We also hope to gain access to other parcels owned by the company, since its holdings in the area are extensive.

Suspected Feeding Trees

1. The heavily scaled, recently dead oak (on which one of our Reconyx cameras is focused) has had some additional bark stripped away since June, but there were no fresh chips at the base of the tree. We have had no hits on the Reconyx camera, so it seems likely that whatever removed the bark did so during a time when the camera was not operational. The adjacent persimmon tree that we girdled last May has died, but there has not been any woodpecker feeding activity on it as yet (Figure 1.) We will continue to monitor this location.



Figure 1. Scaled oak (left) and adjacent, girdled and recently dead persimmon. There has been limited additional scaling on the oak since June. None of it appeared to be very recent.

2. The suspected former nest tree continues to deteriorate, having been dead for over a year. Some of the bark remains tight, but it is quite loose in some spots. There were many sizeable, fresh bark chips at the base of the tree (Figure 2.) These chips are of a size that is not consistent with known Pileated Woodpecker chips from our area; however, given the fact that the bark is very loose on some parts of the tree, there is a significant possibility that this scaling is PIWO work. At the same time, most of the wood on the tree remains hard, and there was no indication that any excavation accompanied the scaling.



Figure 2. Bark chips at the base of the suspected former nest tree. Although they are large, the condition of the tree is such that they could well be the work of Pileated Woodpeckers.

3. Honey locust with scaling on the high branches in January and March 2010. There were no clear indications of recent scaling on this tree, which we believe was worked on by Ivory-billed Woodpeckers between January and March of 2010. Several inconclusive images were obtained during that period, as discussed below. The bark surrounding the heavily scaled areas appears to be sloughing off naturally now. When I visited the tree on November 13, there were no signs of this sloughing; the rains on the 14th and 15th may have been a precipitating factor. See Figure 3. This tree is still alive but is clearly moribund. We may resume monitoring in this location once visibility improves.



Figure 3. Suspected Ivorybill feeding tree, initially scaled between January and March 2010, showing apparent natural sloughing of bark.

Other suspected feeding trees in the search area, including the persimmon found in November 2009 and the honey locust where sightings took place in the same month, have deteriorated to such a degree that bark loss could be due to a number of factors. The same is true for the logging slash mentioned above. There are patches of recent scaling on some trees, but with the passage of over a year, the bark has loosened considerably, increasing the likelihood that the scaling is the work of another species. See Figure 4.



Figure 4. Suspected recent scaling on persimmon log cut in July 2009, Avoyelles Parish, November 2010. Older scaling on this and other nearby logs was white as opposed to reddish-brown.

Recent Scaling in the Project Coyote Search Area

As noted, I found relatively little recent scaling in the primary Project Coyote search area. Some of what I did find was almost certainly PIWO work, since it was from a honey locust within approximately 50 feet of a known PIWO roost/nest tree, a location where Pileateds are seen on a regular basis in a territory they defend. I found very similar chips at the base of another honey locust, and these too are presumably the work of a Pileated Woodpecker. Bark chips found beneath two other trees, a honey locust and a hackberry, had characteristics that may be inconsistent with PIWO work.

As has been the case with other hardwood chips obtained in our search area, the presumed and suspected Pileated chips are relatively small and thin; they tend to be less dense and more breakable than the category of chips I believe to be the work of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. The likely Pileated chips I found in our primary search area this fall are from honey locusts. In both cases, the trees appeared to have relatively loose bark and to be in a fairly advanced state of decay. Honey locust is a very hard wood, but on these suspected PIWO chips, it was easy to dig into any adhering sapwood with a fingernail. Figures 6-8. This is a marked contrast to some large honey locust chips collected in March. See Figure 5.



Figure 5. Honey locust bark chip collected in March 2010. The chip measures 9"x3", weighs approximately 2.25 ounces and has .25" of adhering cambium, which is dense and hard.



Figure 6. Suspected Pileated Woodpecker chip from a honey locust. Leaf litter gives a sense of scale.



Figure 7. Suspected Pileated Woodpecker chips from around the base of the same tree.



Figure 8. Presumed Pileated Woodpecker chips from a honey locust located within

approximately 50 feet of a known PIWO roost/nest tree. Leaf litter and narrow gauge hog trap grating for scale.

By contrast, I found one honey locust that I suspect to have had a recent visit from an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Some of the bark chips found at the base of this tree were similar in size to those I have associated with Pileated Woodpeckers; however, a couple of them were significantly larger. See Figures 9 and 10. These chips were found prior to the inclement weather of November 14-16, and the way in which they are scattered around the base of the tree is consistent with their having been knocked off rather than with natural sloughing. They were, however, not as hard and dense as the chips found in March, which appear to have come from what were living limbs.



Figure 9. Bark chips near the base of a honey locust, Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana. Note the large chip in the foreground and the even larger one behind it.



Figure 10. Suspected IBWO bark chip, Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana. This chip is the larger one in the background of Figure 7. Windshield wiper shown for scale.

On November 13, I found evidence of recent woodpecker work on a dead hackberry (twigs and leaves still present.) This tree is located perhaps 50 yards from the suspected former nest tree. The fracturing of bark that seems to characterize the decay process in hackberries had started to occur on this tree (impressionistically, at an earlier stage than is typical.) In hackberries, this natural fracturing apparently takes place long before the bark begins to fall away. The bark chips found at the base of this hackberry were clearly not the product of natural sloughing, given the varying size of the chips and the way they were scattered around the base of the tree. Some of the chips were quite large and had substantial amounts of hard sapwood adhering to the bark. See Figure 11.



Figure 11. Bark chips from a recently dead hackberry, Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana. Note the older chip on the lower left and the very large one on the right. There are quite a few smaller chips in the background.

I visited this tree on several other occasions during the following week; the last visit was on the morning of November 20th. Patricia and I were on our way to stake out the cavities in the suspected nest tree, as we had done on the two preceding mornings. We arrived at the base of the hackberry shortly before sunrise and found evidence of very fresh work, including one massive bark chip. See Figure 12. Unfortunately, we had been informed that duck season opened on the 20th but not that it was the opening day of deer season on private land. When the shooting started, the area sounded like a war zone, leading us to doubt that our orange caps would be sufficient to keep us safe. We took the chip and left in great haste, without photographing the base of the tree or being able to do the stake out. This was an unlucky turn of events; the scaling was most likely done on the afternoon of the 19th, and there is a possibility that whatever was responsible was roosting in the nearby sweet gum (although previous stakeouts of this tree have been fruitless.)

Fractured hackberry bark is not “tight” in the strict sense of the word; however, the size and weight of these chips lead me to suspect that they are inconsistent with the work of Pileated Woodpeckers. There were also intriguing possible bill marks on the wood. See Figures 13-14.



Figure 12. Bark chip found at the base of a hackberry, November 20, 2010, Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana. This chip weighs 2 pounds, 13 ounces and is 32.5"x10".



Figure 13. Possible bill mark on hackberry bark, Avoyelles Parish, November 2010. This appears to have been the result of a downward strike or strikes.



Figure 14. Suspected bill mark on hackberry bark, Ayovelles Parish, November 2010. This mark appears to have resulted from a lateral blow or blows.

Public Land in East-Central Louisiana

Over the course of this trip, we took the opportunity to make brief visits to some of the public land in the region. We stayed in a hunting camp on the eastern edge of Grassy Lake WMA and drove through the habitat in that area daily. We also visited Lake Ophelia NWR, Spring Bayou WMA, Red River WMA, and Three Rivers WMA, where we spent more time and did some exploring on foot (discussed below.) All of the WMAs appear to have at least some habitat that might be suitable for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. Lake Ophelia NWR seemed somewhat less impressive, based on our very cursory exploration.

I was able to speak to a number of local people, including one man who resides year-round at a hunting camp near Grassy Lake WMA and another who spends a great deal of time in that WMA. Neither claimed to have seen an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Two other locals (my host and his adult son) gave plausible accounts of seeing ivorybills on Pomme de Terre WMA; on looking at the sketches in the Louisiana hunting guide, the son recalled seeing a woodpecker with a black crest and that he had always assumed it was a female PIWO.

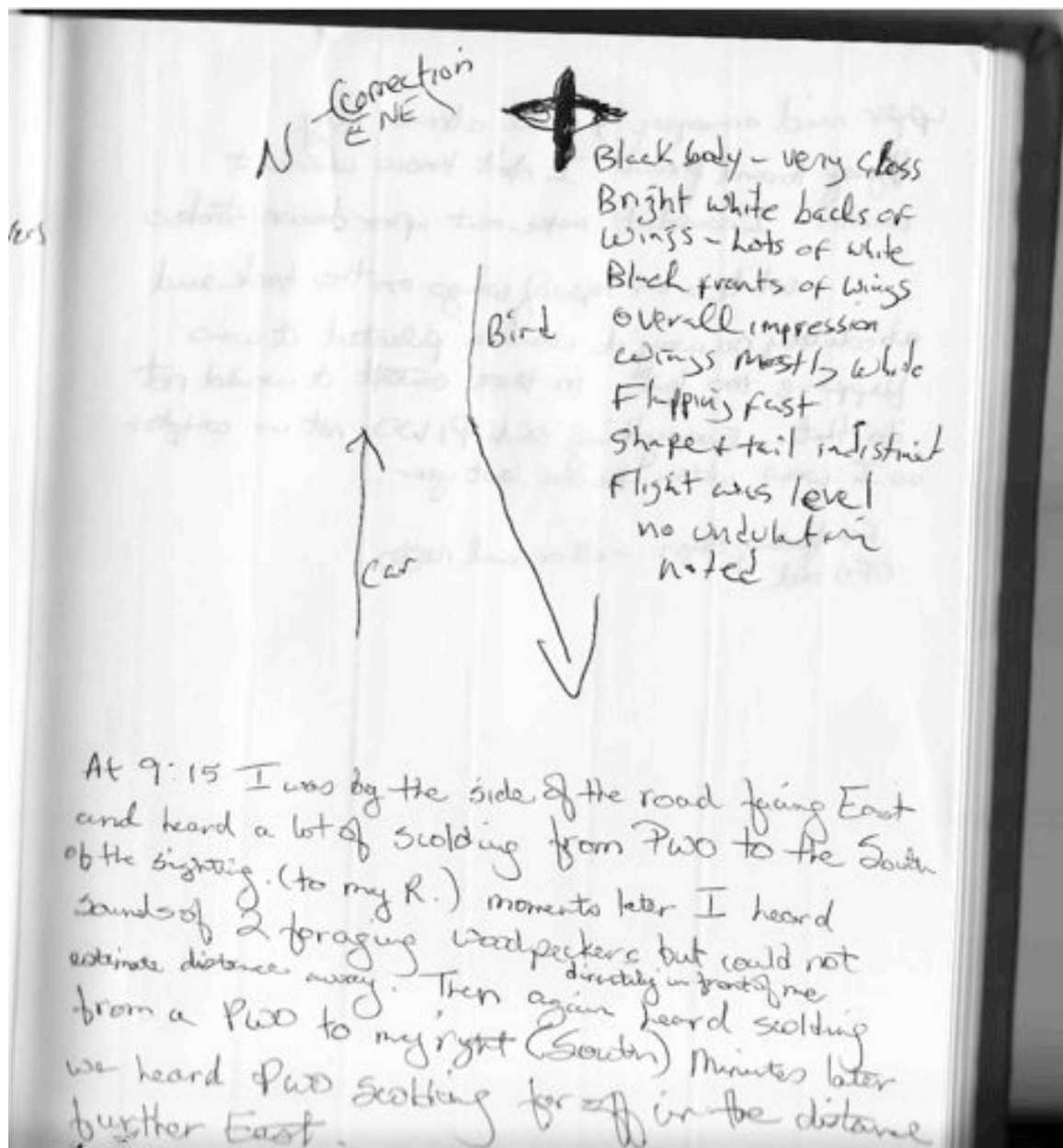
Three Rivers WMA

On the morning of November 16th, the weather started out inclement, so we decided to take a drive through Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area to look at the habitat there. By the time we reached the WMA, approximately 9 am, the rain

had stopped, but the skies were still overcast. Shortly after we crossed into the WMA, between the entrance to the WMA and the cut-off for the Angola ferry, I had a possible sighting. I said, "ooh" and after a pause added, "I think I might have seen an ivorybill." My notes, dictated to Patricia within less than an hour of the incident and then appended by me, are reproduced below:

10/16/10 9: am

We were on LAIS headed in a NE direction
Sky's cloudy 50's° not sure of wind direction
or strength. we were between entrance to 3 Rive
WMA + turnoff for Angolan prison Ferry
Car at 50 MPH. I saw a B+W bird flying to
my right, toward me, but angling away to the
South. I observed a . . . the body of the
bird and front end of the ~~wing~~ ^{wing} were glossy
black and the backs of the wings were brilliant
white. From the car, it was difficult to judge
distance + size of bird; However I would
estimate distance to be 75 to 100 yds
and subsequent observation of a flicker at
same distance, approximately. suggested
bird was considerably larger; however this was
not my impression at the time of the sighting.
Cannot rule out redheaded WP. Habitat? ~~prison~~
Many WP active in area; at least 2 PWD
Downy 2 Redbelly heard 1 Flicker seen.
notes dictated at 9:45
blapping very fast
↳ for redhead



Immediately after the possible sighting, we made a u-turn and pulled onto a dirt road that transects the WMA. I called Frank Wiley and described what I had seen to him. Patricia crossed LA 15 and went down the bank of the levee, where she heard the scolding described at the bottom of page two. We attempted to cross into the woods in the direction the bird had gone (this is an area between the Mississippi and the levee.) Entry into this area was not feasible on foot; the woods on the river side of the levee seem to be quite impenetrable and probably get virtually no human traffic. After abandoning this effort, I dictated the notes. I added the sketch and the directions shortly thereafter. The orientation of the bird in the sketch is reversed in relation to the directions shown; my drawing skills are very poor, and the sketch is

intended to reflect color pattern only, not body size or wing size and shape. Figure 15 shows the approximate location of the possible sighting on Louisiana Route 15.



Figure 15. Blue pin is the approximate location of possible sighting, November 16, 2010. Red pin marks the entrance to Three Rivers WMA.

I was initially very hesitant to share this sighting with anyone other than a couple of close friends/associates, but on further reflection, I think it best to be forthcoming about it. I have replayed the scene again and again in my mind, and I simply cannot be sure about the size of the bird and therefore cannot rule out Red-headed Woodpecker, although I did not see any red and believe the glossy appearance to be inconsistent with a juvenile; my impression both at the time and

as I reflect on the experience, is that the bird was smaller than I would expect for an ivorybill but too big for a red-headed. I am certain it was not a Pileated Woodpecker. I got a very good look at the upper surface of the wings and am certain about the glossiness of the black and white, even in overcast conditions. I am also sure the bird was flying fast and beating its wings rapidly; it was flying high and almost parallel to the forest edge before banking into the woods. See Figure 16. While I understand the habitat is suitable for red-headed (the species of eastern woodpecker, other than red-cockaded, with which I am least familiar,) the behavior and manner of flight (fast with rapid wingbeats) seem less so.



Figure 16. Approximate point of view of November 16 possible sighting. The bird was flying between, but well above, the nearer, small trees and the forest in the background, close to the level of the canopy in the background. The flight was initially parallel to the tree line, before the bird banked to its left, apparently into the woods. Photograph was taken approximately one hour after the incident, but it fairly accurately reflects the lighting conditions at the time.

A note about observer bias and my state of mind is perhaps appropriate here. While this trip was an ivorybill search, I was not looking for ivorybills or expecting to see one at this time or in this location; in fact, I was not looking for birds of any kind, as I normally do while driving; I was looking at the habitat, trying to assess its quality, and looking for places that might be worth exploring.

Whether or not I saw an ivorybill, Patricia and I decided to take a quick look at an easily accessible part of the WMA across the levee from and within a quarter mile west of the location of the possible sighting. We parked at the check in station and took a short walk into some impressive bottomland forest. We found a snag (probably a pecan) that had numerous large exit tunnels and some scaled areas that were intriguing. Some of the bark was still tight. See Figure 17.



Figure 17. Scaled snag in Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area.

We returned to the area later in the week and walked around the lake, which is to the north of LA 15 (see Figure 14.) During that visit, we spent some more time looking at the snag and were able to find some bark chips beneath it; some of the chips are of a size and density that would be consistent with what I consider likely ivorybill work, while others are considerably smaller and reflect a more superficial form of bark removal that does not reach the sapwood (Figure 18.) On closer examination of the snag, we found that two types of scaling were noticeable – deeper work that reached the sapwood and more superficial removal of bark that is consistent with observed PIWO scaling on pecans in Avoyelles parish. These two forms of scaling are visible in Figures 17 and 19.



Figure 18. Bark chips found under scaled snag, Three Rivers WMA. Reference object is a quarter, diameter of just under 1”.



Figure 19. Detail of scaled bark, Three Rivers WMA. Deeper scaling is apparent, but note the more superficial work, for example on the lower left.

Based on the fact that the chips were found just beneath the surface layer of leaf litter, in area that is apparently subject to frequent flooding, I suspect that at

least some of the scaling took place during the late spring or summer of 2010 (when the area was dry) notwithstanding the weathered appearance of the wood. Thus, this work is likely recent but not fresh.

We made a complete circuit of the lake shown just north of LA15 in Figure 15 (which I believe is called Carr's Point Lake,) something that is probably difficult or impossible unless water levels are very low. We did not find any other suggestive scaling in the area but were very impressed by the quality of the habitat, which includes numerous large trees with DBH of 3 feet or more, and a large quantity of recently dead wood, both standing and blown down. It seems likely that a small tornado hit the area in recent months, since the leaves were still on much of the blowdown. See Figures 20 and 21. We saw a small flock of Rusty Blackbirds at the north end of the lake. If Ivorybills are present in and around Three Rivers WMA, this patch of habitat should be attractive to them, and it would be worth revisiting the area in the coming months.



Figure 20. Habitat in Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area.



Figure 21. Large pecan, Three Rivers WMA. This was one of the largest trees in the area, but there were many of similar size. (Photo by Patricia Johnson)

On November 15, Patricia, Amy Shutt and I visited the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science to examine Ivory-billed and Pileated Woodpecker specimens. We are deeply grateful to Van Remsen for giving us access to the collection. This visit gave us an opportunity to expand on work that Amy and Frank Wiley did several months ago involving bill marks and bark chips. They will be posting the details of their work on the Project Coyote website in the near future, and some of what we found on November 15 will likely be included in their more in-depth examination. We used the honey locust chip shown in Figure 10 and attempted to determine whether some of the apparent bill marks were more consistent with the size and shape of an IBWO bill or with that of a PIWO. Figures 22-25 show the results of this comparison.



Figure 22. Ivory-billed Woodpecker specimen and honey locust bark chip found in Avoyelles Parish, November 2010. Note the close fit between the bill and the apparent strike mark. (Photo by Patricia Johnson)



Figure 23. Pileated Woodpecker specimen and the bark chip shown in Figure 21. The bill appears to be too small to have caused the strike mark. (Photo by Patricia Johnson)



Figure 24. Ivory-billed Woodpecker specimen with bark chip shown above. Again, the apparent strike mark seems to match the size and shape of an IBWO bill. (Photo by Patricia Johnson)



Figure 25. Pileated Woodpecker and same bark chip. Note the very poor fit between the bill and the suspected strike mark. (Photo by Patricia Johnson)

Until such time as the persistence of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker is conclusively documented, the examination and analysis of bark chips and foraging

sign will be, of necessity, a somewhat speculative endeavor; however, we have been working hard to gather examples of known, presumed, and suspected Pileated Woodpecker scaling and chips (I have passed the samples I collected on this trip along to Amy Shutt and Frank Wiley for storage and perhaps further examination.) Thus far, there seems to be a limited category of scaling (and the bark chips that are its byproduct) that departs significantly from scaling associated with Pileated Woodpeckers. The trees involved are generally living or recently dead, and the chips associated with this kind of scaling are significantly larger, denser, and heavier. Many of these chips show evidence of one or more lateral blows. As illustrated in Figures 22-25, the size and shape of these apparent bill marks is more consistent with Ivory-billed Woodpecker morphology than with that of the Pileated Woodpecker. I would suggest that the combination of these circumstantial elements points very strongly toward Ivory-billed Woodpeckers as the source of some of the scaling in Avoyelles Parish.

The visit to the Natural Science Museum gave me the opportunity to consider an additional piece of inconclusive evidence obtained on March 5, 2010. At that time, Project Coyote had a Reconyx camera aimed at the honey locust shown in Figure 3. On the morning of March 5, the camera recorded a series of images of a crested woodpecker foraging in the high branches. Figure 26, the raw image 9463 with a red box added to show the location of the bird, was the best of the series. In Figure 27, the raw image has been cropped but is otherwise unmodified. It shows the bird at 100%.



Figure 26. Reconyx image of suspected Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Avoyelles Parish, March 5, 2010.

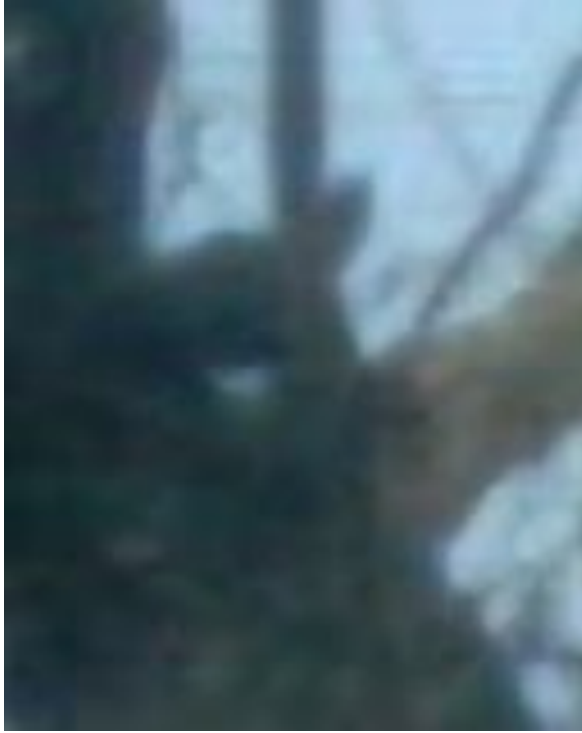


Figure 27. Detail from Reconyx image 9463. Avoyelles Parish, March 5, 2010.

Since this photograph was taken, we have obtained two newer Reconyx cameras that have zoom lens capabilities and much superior image quality. The camera used to obtain this image is extremely limited, and distortion starts to occur with even modest enlargements. For Figure 28, I used OnOne Essentials, a Photoshop plug-in, to enlarge the image and smooth out the pixellation. In addition to the smoothing process, the program takes one through a series of steps for modifying contrast, brightness and color balance. Even though the enhancement process produced more artifacts in the pink/purple/red spectrum, the bird's head shows no trace of red. By contrast, a Pileated Woodpecker photographed by the same camera under similar lighting conditions and at a slightly greater distance (albeit in profile) shows a hint of red in the crest (Figure 29.)



Figure 28. Cropped and enhanced detail of image 9463, Avoyelles Parish, March 5, 2010.



Figure 29. Pileated Woodpecker photographed by the same camera as the suspected Ivory-billed Woodpecker shown in Figures 26-28.

The bird shown in Figures 26-28 appears to have the top of its head and crest pointed toward the camera, and it seems likely that the bill is obscured by the intervening branch, although it is by no means clear that the bill would be visible at all, given the lighting conditions and the poor resolution of the image. On my visit to the museum at LSU, I was interested in comparing the heads of Pileated and Ivory-billed Woodpecker specimens to see how they would look at this angle, since it is not one that is easily observed in nature. (One of the females in Audubon's iconic image can be seen in approximately the same posture.) In all cases, it seems to me that the red in the Pileated's crest ought to be visible even in a poor, backlit image. Figure 30 compares the appearance of the heads of female and male Pileated Woodpeckers with that of a female Ivory-billed Woodpecker, viewed from roughly the same perspective as the bird shown in Figures 26-28.

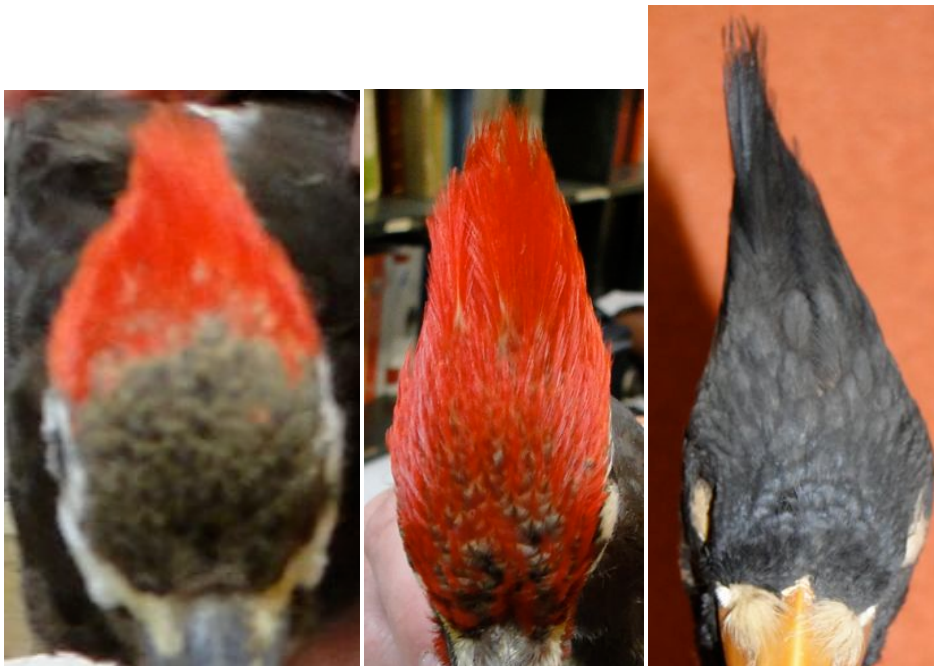


Figure 30. Frontal views of female Pileated, male Pileated, and female Ivory-billed Woodpecker heads. (Photos by Patricia Johnson)

While the distinction between close-up photographs of study skins and backlit, low-resolution photographs taken by a game camera at approximately 100 feet is obvious, the March 5 Reconyx image is not so badly backlit as to be devoid of color. Even at less than full-size, the contrast between the areas of scaled and intact bark is quite vivid. At 100%, the brownish hue of the remaining leaves is readily visible in the original image. In a severely backlit photo, many of these more subtle color variations would likely be lost. Since they are present in 9463, it seems reasonable to conclude that some hint of the vivid red of a Pileated Woodpecker's head and crest (even a female's) would be discernible. This is not to contend that

9463 is conclusive, just that it is strongly suggestive, especially when considered in conjunction with the scaling on the tree, and the bark chip data we have gathered.