About the Cover Drawing

by Darryl Wheye

Most Ivory-billed Woodpecker skins look like a dog got hold of them. Most Ivory-bill photographs are in black-and-white, leaving viewers guessing about the quality of the ivory and the intricacies of the black feathers. Most Ivory-bill paintings are in color, but few clarify the width of the stripe that runs from cheek to neck and then down the back, and in reproductions of these paintings, demarcation of the surrounding black plumage has a tendency to disappear into shadow. Most drawings don't fade into shadow, but few show clearly how the inward curve of the tail feathers seems to serve as a spring when this "third leg" is used to support a bird clinging to a vertical surface. Written descriptions are generally clear, but are more apt to focus on measurements and field marks. Julie Zickefoose was absolutely right when she described painting the towhee for the January/February 2007 cover <aba.org/pubs/birding/archives/vol39no1p17w1.pdf>: It *is* really nice to "refer right to the living bird" when it's the subject of your painting. But for the Ivory-bill, at least for now, that's not going to happen.

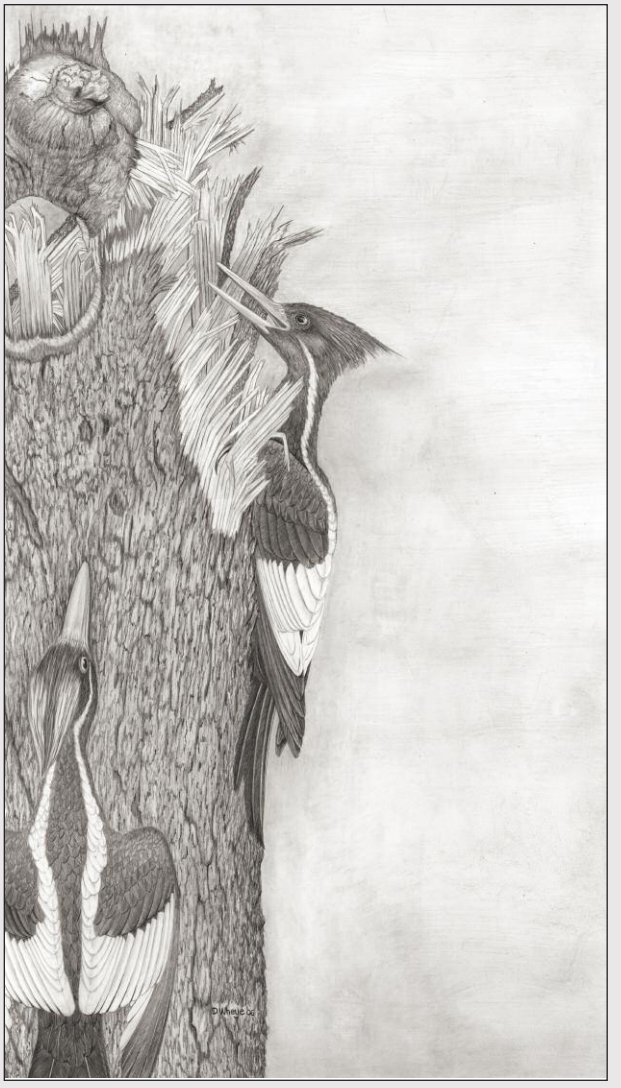
Singer Tract, Louisiana; 1935. Photograph by Arthur A. Allen, © Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

When I selected the Ivory-billed Woodpecker from the list of possible cover subjects that *Birding* Editor Ted Floyd sent almost a year ago, I hoped, and to a degree assumed, that new photographs of the recently rediscovered birds would surface. As time went by and hope faded, I changed tack and began making plans to put together an image based on an amalgam of descriptions, old specimens, archival photographs, paintings, and drawings. The process seemed fairly straightforward: The search would begin on the web and then move to the library. Out of the jumble I'd try to create something new, but linked to the past.

Hand-colored collotype by © Rex Brasher; image courtesy of <www.minniesland.com>.

I found the descriptions by John James Audubon and Alexander Wilson, and the compilation by Arthur Cleveland Bent, as well as coverage by Roger Tory Peterson, Frank M. Chapman, and other field guide authors. I came across the well-known photographs by Arthur A. Allen and James T. Tanner. I studied images by John Abbott, Audubon, Rex Brasher, Mark Catesby, Don Eckelberry, Emily Eaton, Theodore Jasper, William MacGillivray, Peterson, George Miksch Sutton, Louis Jean Pierre Vieillot, and Wilson—people who actually saw the birds. And I explored images by Thomas Bennett, Carl Brenders, Larry Chandler, Guy Coheleach, Daniel McQuestion, N. John Schmitt, Julie Zickefoose, and William Zimmerman—who were born too late to work from a live subject. I located photographs of skins and body parts in books like those by Philip Hoose and by Jerome Jackson, and literally celebrated when Joel Sartore's two-page spread of Harvard's Ivory-bill collection was published in the December 2006 issue of *National Geographic*. I looked for photographs of extant woodpecker cousins, like the Imperial and the Pileated, as well as woodpecker paintings by Robert Bateman and Charles Frederick Tunnecliffe (who took measuring and counting feathers to heart).

I sent Ted a preliminary design. As always turn-around time was wonderfully fast, and within a couple of days I was ready to begin. Surrounded by books, magazines, and printouts of scanned pictures that would be part of my everyday world for the next few months, I sorted the images by body part, pose, and habitat. I would be studying the eye from one source, the toe from another, the bill shape from a third, and so forth. Answers to questions like "Are the bristles at the base of the bill white?" were found in written descriptions and evident in many of the images, but answers to questions like "Is the bill bright ivory, like the teeth of a dentist, or dull, like the teeth of an indifferent tea-drinker?" and "Do the secondaries swirl around the back of a perching bird the way some artists show them, and do they all turn black at their base?" were harder to come by. Harder still were the postures. I tried to get a feel for the way the female might have stretched her neck, and might have shown distress. Did my birds look like they were clinging to a trunk? Did they look like they could assess the situation they found themselves in?



Drawing by © Darryl Wheye, Science Art—Birds.

Finally, I was ready to work on the narrative. I had wanted to "say" something about the absence of confirming sightings since the 28 April 2005 publication in *Science* of the species' rediscovery. Through an earlier exchange of e-mails with Ted, I had decided to use graphite. Removing the realism of color allowed me to provide a plausible, albeit entirely contrived, calamity that could have befallen the birds.

I chose the effects of a hurricane—Hurricane Katrina, even, whose prodigious gusts, according to my narrative, felled an adjacent diseased tree. When the massive but disease-worn tree crashed to the ground, it hit its smaller neighbor, snapping the nest tree at the weakened site of the nest hole.

We see the pair of Ivory-bills returning to their ruined nest, much the way human residents of the Gulf Coast returned to see their ruined homes before moving on with their lives. The female peers inside while the male watches.

This example of "Science Art" is representative of those discussed in my forthcoming book, *Humanity, Nature, and Birds: A Gallery of Science Art*, written with Donald Kennedy, for Yale University Press. The small volume, with a foreword by Paul Ehrlich, is scheduled for publication later this year.