

LOOKING FOR THE IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER IN EASTERN CUBA—Alberto R. Estrada. 2014. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. San Bernardino, CA. 130 pages. ISBN 978-1503351844. \$25.00.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker is an avian Rorschach. Birders, ornithologists, and armchair observers of all stripes project their ideas onto this iconic species. It inhabits a liminal space between existence and extinction, between science and cryptozoology, between known and unknown, and when it comes to Cuba, between species and subspecies. Thus, Alberto Estrada's *Looking for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Eastern Cuba* is an important addition to the sparse literature on *Campephilus principalis bairdii*, or as treated hereafter, *Campephilus bairdii* (Fleischer et al. 2006). Estrada, among the youngest living people to have (almost) undisputedly seen an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, whether in Cuba or North America, is silent on the taxonomy; however, his book sheds light on the similarities and differences between the congeners and how they are viewed in the birding and ornithological communities.

"Almost undisputedly" tells a tale. American ornithologist Lester Short had visited Cuba on a brief search for the Cuban ivorybill in 1985. In preparation for a more thorough expedition in April 1986, Giraldo Alayón García and Estrada led two expeditions to eastern Cuba in October 1985 and March 1986; the March 1986 expedition resulted in sightings. These sightings were in the same general area where John Dennis observed ivorybills in 1948 (Dennis 1948) and George and Nancy Lamb had conducted a study in the late 1950s (Lamb 1957). Alayón and Estrada depended on local informants to find the birds, as had Dennis and the Lambs. Similarly, James Tanner (1940, 1942) and Arthur Allen and Paul Kellogg (Allen and Kellogg 1937) relied on the expert help of local residents to find birds on the North American mainland.

It is hard to consider the Cuban ivorybill without reference to the North American species, especially since the taxonomy seems unlikely to change. The birds look identical and apparently sound alike; their general behavior appears to be quite similar, though their preferred habitats do not (Jackson 2002, 2004). Whatever the biological and behavioral differences, the greatest divergence between the two birds is psychic: a post-colonial mental artifact, with the North American species disappearing in the face of "manifest destiny." This trope links the ivorybill to the "Noble Savage" and is rooted in Wilson's early 19th-century account, ". . . king of his tribe" (Wilson 1811). It has shaped perceptions of the species—as doomed by the march of "civilization"—ever since. From this perspective, Cuba can be imagined as a "final frontier," an unspoiled place where ivorybills are much likelier to remain.

Estrada mentions controversy in Cuba in the aftermath of the March 1986 sightings and those made during the Short expedition a month later, but the similarities between the mainland and

Cuba largely end there. Such controversy was predominantly local and political, and the validity of the Cuban sightings is not widely questioned today, even though most of them were seemingly brief, distant, and apparently without binoculars.

As Estrada recounts, a few vocalizations were heard but not recorded. Presumed foraging marks were found. However, no distinctive double knocks were heard, and no physical evidence was obtained. The lack of physical evidence is noted in the recently published *The Birds of Cuba: An Annotated Checklist* (Kirkconnell et al. 2020), albeit without the vitriolic incredulity that has accompanied virtually every post-World War II report from the mainland, whether accompanied by physical evidence or not (Gallagher 2005, Steinberg 2008). *The Annotated Checklist* also references "convincing reports" from local people as affording some hope of persistence. On the mainland, such local reports are frequently treated with disdain, ignored altogether, or even presumed to be fraudulent (Steinberg 2008). There is some merit to the skepticism and preference for Cuban records. The Cuban Crow (*Corvus nasicus*) has been suggested as a potential confusion species under certain lighting conditions (pers. comm. M. Lammertink and W.C. Hunter). However, the mainland's common Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), which is similar in size and coloration, is much more prone to being misidentified as the ivorybill. At the same time, anyone who has spent time talking to locals about big woodpeckers in the southeastern United States quickly realizes that some people are keen observers and others are not. Unsophisticated informants may even mistake Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) for the ivorybill, but more astute observers accurately describe the differences between the Pileated and Ivory-billed woodpeckers they claim to have seen.

A possible basis for holding out more hope for the Cuban bird than for the mainland species lies in the more recent, undisputed physical evidence. Photographs were obtained in Cuba by Dennis in 1948 (Dennis 1948) and Lamb in 1956 (Gallagher 2005). These and other earlier photographs from Cuba are included in Estrada's volume, which may be the only published source that compiles them all. The last undisputed photographs from the mainland were made by Tanner in 1939 (Tanner 1940).

By contrast, as the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Recovery Plan and other sources show, there have been numerous reports from within the species' historic range in North America since 1939 (Jackson 2004, Steinberg 2008, USFWS 2010). Even allowing for errors, fabrications, and varying levels of detail and quality, the number is substantial—approximately 200, at minimum—and many individual records involve multiple people and observations. This estimate includes only those reports that have reached higher levels of government or have been uncovered by independent researchers. It is important to note that a small but substantial number of these records have come from highly experienced or professional observers.

Anti-government sentiment in much of the ivorybill's mainland home range is strong; mistrust of government and fear of ridicule or worse may serve to suppress reporting. The latter pressure influenced ornithologist John Terres to keep a sighting to himself for more than 30 years for "fear of being scorned" (Gallagher 2005). The Recovery Plan catalogues the contested physical evidence that has been obtained in recent decades by John Dennis (in Texas, 1968), George Reynard (in Texas, 1968), Neal Wright (in Texas, 1967–1969), H. Norton Agey and George M. Heinzmann (in Florida, 1967–1969), Fielding Lewis (in Louisiana, 1971), David Luneau and others (in Arkansas, 2004), Michael D. Collins (in Louisiana, 2006 and 2008), Geoffrey Hill *et al.* (in Florida, 2005–2006), William Pulliam (in Tennessee, 2009), and Project Coyote/Principalis (in Louisiana, 2009–2020) (Agey and Heinzmann 1971, Jackson 2004, USFWS 2010, W.C. Hunter unpubl. obs.).

Mainland habitat conditions for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker have been slowly improving, and forested acreage in the southeastern US has increased since World War II. Moreover, the original home range of the North American bird was many, many times more extensive than the range of the Cuban ivorybill. Given the greater vulnerability of island species in general (Pimm *et al.* 1988, D'Antonio and Dudley 1995, Frankham 1998, Blackburn *et al.* 2004), it makes sense to hold out more hope for the mainland. From this perspective, the optimism afforded to ivorybill observations from Cuba and the willingness to credit relatively flimsier evidence suggests underlying biases that are more cultural than scientific.

Like Martjan Lammertink and Tim Gallagher, who conducted their own survey for ivorybills in Eastern Cuba in 2016 (McClelland 2016), Estrada believes the Cuban bird to be extinct. After that expedition, Gallagher (pers. comm.) remained optimistic about the North American species but was convinced the Cuban one is gone. As Estrada recounts, he and Lammertink reached a similar conclusion during their 1993 expedition (Lammertink and Estrada 1995).

Estrada's brief book may serve as an epitaph for the Cuban Ivory-billed Woodpecker, as James T. Tanner's monograph (Tanner 1942) may have for the North American bird, so one wishes for more depth and detail in Estrada's accounting. Nevertheless, this is an important contribution to the literature for its imagery alone; it also includes some interesting information on Cuban herpetofauna and Estrada's own contributions to Cuban herpetology. Unfortunately, the English translation reviewed here is stiff, literal, and undoubtedly far inferior to the original Spanish (Estrada 2014). Still, this is an essential book for anyone with a serious interest in the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

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