

THE LAST

A search for the rarest creature on earth

by DON MOSER

It rained for two days and then the morning came on clear and cold with a high wind full of vultures. Hungry after the rains, the vultures blew through the blustering air like umbrellas lost in a storm and whenever we looked up there was one overhead, slipping sideways in the wind, a little out of control. Ahead of us John Dennis plodded through the swamp, his shirttail hanging out, hands in his pockets. We had been searching for ten days, with no success and diminishing hopes, but now Dennis stopped still and looked around. "Wait a minute," he said. He walked away, stopped, came back. "This is it," he said. "This is the place."

We had come here, to the Big Thicket of east Texas, to search for the rarest creature on earth. It is a large and spectacular bird, the ivory-billed woodpecker, and it is not rare in the sense of whooping cranes or California condors, several dozen of which survive; the ivory bill's very existence has been in question for years, and if any have made it into the second half of this century they could number at most a few pairs, a pair, or perhaps—for the birds are long-lived—a solitary individual who has lived out a decade or score of years alone.

The ivory bill has been a mystery for half a century. It was first considered extinct in the 1920s, rediscovered in Louisiana in the 1930s; it vanished again during the war years and was not seen again until 1950. Since then it has been a will-o'-the-wisp, emerging briefly from the shadowed corners of our past, then disappearing again into the mists. One is seen fleetingly in Texas, rumored about in Georgia, heard calling in the Carolinas. In 1969 a single white feather was discovered in Florida and in 1971 two photographs, of disputed validity, were made in Louisiana at a location

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IVORY BILL

Illustrations



Twice in his life he has seen the bird

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still shrouded in secrecy. Aside from these shreds, no sighting has been confirmed by a single piece of evidence.

No creature has been searched for so assiduously. Among themselves the searchers sometimes cooperate, but at other times their relationships are ridden by feuds and jealousies and secrets, as if they were not ornithologists searching for a bird but Bogarts and Greenstreets vying for some Maltese falcon encrusted with precious jewels.

Their motives vary. Many just wish to add it to their bird lists. Some feel that if the bird were found it could perhaps be saved from extinction. Others know that by finding it they could achieve a kind of fame, or even money. Some, committed conservationists, realize that the discovery of this rare creature could be the most powerful of political levers in saving a threatened wilderness; an attempt to save a living specimen, along with its habitat, could move popular opinion and sway legislation.

And there is something else. Partly because the bird is so beautiful and we destroyed it, it comes back to haunt us. It is easy enough to find in it a symbol of all those creatures which we have sent down the road to extinction, of the auks and Carolina parakeets and passenger pigeons, of the great buffalo herds and the plains wolves—of the big wild and the lonely places, of that country inside us where a panther stretches in the sun. To find it would reassure us that a certain part of our past is not yet completely gone.



John Dennis is a naturalist, 54 years old, and he has been searching for the ivory bill for half of his lifetime. He has sometimes wryly described himself as "the last surviving ivory-billed woodpecker hunter." He is not the last, but he is certainly the most stubborn.

Dennis is a quiet man, lean and fit from his life as a field biologist, uncomfortable among groups of people and given to long silences, at home only in the woods among his trees and birds. He seems to lack intensity and only after some time does one begin to realize that he is obsessed.

He is one of the few people on earth who have seen a living ivory bill and can prove it. In 1948, he and a friend went to Cuba, where a race of ivory bills was reported to survive, and after several days of searching the men discovered a pair of the birds and were able to observe and photograph them. These are the last certifiable photographs of an ivory bill ever made, and Dennis was not to see another ivory bill for 16 years—though he sought them diligently all over the southeastern United States. When he did see his next ivory bill in 1966, the sighting took place on the spot where we were standing now, next to the ink-black water of a slough near the Neches River.

Under the cypress trees, with the vultures skidding overhead, Dennis spoke without emotion. "It was a cold, windy day, like this. The bird was down on the ground. It flew up to that dead cypress there, and I saw the wing pattern perfectly. When I tried to get closer the bird flew across the bayou. I took my clothes off and plunged in—I almost froze, but I was so excited I didn't care. On the other side I saw him again. He was sitting on a stump, holding his wings partly spread, and I saw the pattern again."

Dennis had no camera with him on that day, and no witnesses. When his discovery was announced, the reaction from the professional community of ornithologists was skeptical, caustic. If Dennis's personal honesty was not questioned, his competence as a field man was, and the experience scarred him. "It's a matter of honor now," he had told me when we were planning our trip. "I am sure that the bird still exists. I want to prove conclusively that I saw it."

We spent the rest of the day prowling the lowlands along the Neches where Dennis had made his sighting, but only we were out in the wind, and the vultures, and a barred owl that flushed silently away through the trees.

The ivory bill was a superb creature. The male had a flaming crest and stood as tall as a crow, and his black-and-white coloration was so striking that Audubon nicknamed the birds "Vandykes" because they reminded him of "the boldest and noblest productions of that great artist's pencil." The ivory bill was also a creature of incredible physical specialization. With his tail stiff and spined to support him, with his powerful claws and the great ivory-colored bill, he could scale off chunks of bark the size of a man's hand, and could drill holes with the speed and efficiency of a machine.

The ivory bill was a wanderer who ranged far, mated for life, feared no natural predators, and if a man tried to capture one alive he found it a capable adversary. But for all that, the ivory bill started disappearing early in our history. The flaming crest and the bill were prized by Indians, who used them to ornament their ceremonial dress, and white hunters bought the bills to decorate their shot pouches. Amateur collectors and museums accounted for the death of many others.

But it was not hunting that destroyed the ivory bill. Like many creatures which have become extinct, the ivory bill was overspecialized, unadaptable. It lived only on grubs infesting recently dead trees of certain species; large areas of timber were

brief glimpse— was it the bird?

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woodpecker disappeared with them, an accidental and almost unnoticed casualty of progress.

"Just look at all that fresh woodpecker work," Dennis said, laying his paddle across his knees and pointing toward a much-drilled tree onshore. We were now in a flat-bottomed boat on a muddy stream called Pine Island Bayou, on our way to a spot where Dennis's friend, Geraldine Watson, believed she had seen ivory bills in 1968. Ahead of us a large dark bird flew across the bayou, undulating, wings not flapping but opening, then closing, in slow rhythm. "OK, what's that?" Dennis asked, grinning.

"Pileated?" I named the big, common woodpecker of the southern swamps, which resembles the ivory bill closely from any distance.

"Right," Dennis said. "Just testing. An ivory bill flies faster and straighter, more like a duck, and shows white on the trailing edge of the wing, not just on the front."

As we paddled, the wake of some large creature, an otter, perhaps a small alligator, creased the water ahead, then disappeared. From the front of the boat Geraldine Watson said, "There used to be plenty of gators here, but they were cleaned out by professional hunters in 1934, and you hardly ever see one anymore." Geraldine is a lively and contentious lady in her 40s. Slight of build but with the stamina to hike or paddle a boat from daylight to dusk, she is sometimes called "Mrs. Big Thicket," a title which seems to please her. She is a self-taught botanist of considerable ability and a fierce conservationist; the mere mention of her name can produce an expression of acute distress on the face of a timber or oil company executive.

Once, the Big Thicket* was a sprawl of maybe three and a half million acres of woodland and swamp—dark, wild, a tangle of vine and shrub, the air thick with passenger pigeons, the forest full of deer, bear and other game. But for a hundred years now the Thicket has been logged over, oil-drilled over, grazed over and hunted over. Most of the uplands are now pine plantations, and the ranks of young pulpwood trees march steadily toward the river bottoms. Most of the game has been eliminated.



As we floated the bayou, from time to time we got out on shore and tramped around. Dennis in the lead. He is a good man to go into the woods with. He has loved swamps ever since his childhood in Maryland and Virginia, when he used to pore over back copies of *Natural History Magazine* at his grandparents' farm and study the pictures of animals in back of the family's unabridged *Webster's*. As a youth, girls made him nervous; he never knew what to talk about in social groups. What he really liked to do was to get deep into the woods. Now, sharpened by years in the field, his eyes notice things that others would miss.

In midafternoon we reached a big cypress tree. About 30 feet up was a hole, six inches across. Here in 1968 Geraldine Watson saw a family group of large woodpeckers fly up from the acorns on which they had been feeding and she is convinced that they were ivory bills. Dennis stared up at the hole. "Wasps," he said glumly. "Wasps living up there now."

Later that afternoon we took to the bayou again. A large bird lined across the bayou ahead of us and disappeared into the trees. All three of us exclaimed simultaneously. "Boy," Dennis said, "that bird showed a lot of white." It seemed so to me, too—certainly it didn't have the darkish look of a pileated in flight. All of us felt a flush of excitement—could it, my God, be an ivory bill? We paddled into shore, and until near dark we worked through the trees into which the bird had flown, but caught no further sight of it.

That night we returned to our cabin on a tributary of the Neches River, planning to return to thoroughly explore the spot where we had seen the white-flashing bird. But the weather turned bad, rain sheeting down all across the Thicket, and so we used the time tracking down people who, according to local report, had seen the ivory bill. It was a frustrating experience—each interview proving ambiguous.

Near the town of Kountze, an elderly pensioner showed us a riddled post by his onion patch and told us the work had been done by—magnificent malaprop!—an ivorywood peckerbill. The story was preposterous, clearly. Yet when Dennis questioned him the old man described ivory bills with some accuracy. As we left, Dennis shook his head. "This was the problem I had in 1966. I believed that there was some substance to these stories. So I estimated that there were from five to ten pairs of ivory bills in the Thicket, and published it, and that's what got me into trouble. Now I think that most of these people are confusing the bird with a pileated. And yet—sometimes the bird they describe is unmistakably an ivory bill."

We heard that one man in the Thicket, Neal Wright, had not only seen ivory bills, but had photographed them. Thinking of how competitive the searchers were, Dennis felt Wright might be more willing to talk freely if I called on him alone.

I went to visit Wright at his home near Kountze—a house filled with furs, beaver pews and firearms. Wright explained, in a rapid-fire delivery, that he had kept a pair of ivory bills under observation for four years, but he wasn't telling anyone where they were. Once, he said, to protect them from other searchers who were getting close, he had climbed their nest tree, captured the two young, and moved them to another nest hole some distance away. "I want to do what's right for the birds," Wright said. "If I told people where they were, how many people would go tramping in for a look?"

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* Eastex Incorporated, a pulp and paper subsidiary

'I crawled for hours to get these pictures'

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Eventually he agreed to show me his photographs. There were half a dozen transparencies, each showing a black-and-white object high in a tree. The object appeared in two different positions in the slides, so it had moved. It could have an ivory bill, but the distance was so great that it was impossible to be certain. When I told Wright that I thought the pictures were inconclusive he said, "It won't be easy to get more. These birds can see you and hear you a half mile away. I had to crawl on my belly for four hours to get these pictures." Later, Dennis and I discussed Wright. His pictures, if not genuine, were elaborate fakes. His manner, filled with braggadocio, would normally make one skeptical—yet, in a part of the country where every man grows up a skilled hunter and fisherman, Wright was regarded as a master woodsman. In the end neither of us knew what to think.

It was the classic problem—the bird has been reported so often, but with so little substantiating evidence, that any report arouses suspicion. Dennis suffered from that suspicion after his 1966 sighting, and again two years later when he heard an ivory bill call in the Thicket and made a tape recording. The recording was of such poor quality that it was not accepted by the scientists who analyzed it, and indeed, one of them said that it was suspected as a phony, since played at slow speed it sounded like a pencil being rolled across a table. The idea of straightforward Dennis rolling pencils to create a faked record is beyond the bounds of credibility. Even the scientists agreed that such shenanigans, given the man, seemed unlikely. But the controversy over the recording did Dennis's reputation further damage, and his case was not helped by the fact that the man who is generally recognized as the country's leading authority on the ivory bill, Dr. James Tanner, did not believe his claims. Tanner, a Ph.D., a full professor and a department head at the University of Tennessee, says that "Dennis badly wants to find ivory bills; when he says he has seen them he believes he has seen them—but he hasn't." Dennis, who left school before getting his doctorate, and who earns a precarious living as a free-lance biologist, maintains that Tanner is moved by "snobbism. He has that Ph.D. snobbism."

When the weather cleared we headed for the woods again. After a morning of exploration we found a way to approach the spot where we had seen the white-flashing bird. We quartered the forest slowly, at Dennis's methodical pace. If the country was not virgin and untouched, it retained some semblance of wilderness. Carolina wrens sang deliriously along the bayou. Deer started from their beds and bounced away, white flags alert; tracks of raccoon and possum laced the marshy places. One day we flushed a wild boar.

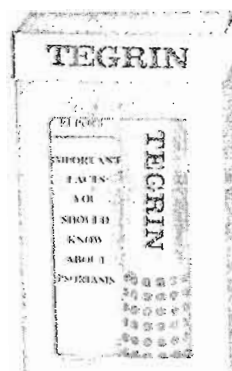
Occasionally we found some encouraging sign. One day, working along a slough, Dennis spied a clump of trees and went sloshing over to them. "Here, look at this, this is exciting," he called to me. The trees were water locusts and much of their bark had been ripped off. "See all this stripping and how tight the bark is. A pileated doesn't do this—he's adaptable, he'll feed on rotten logs. He doesn't have to do all this work, all this stripping. This looks too much like ivory bill work to be true."



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They played the call and heard an answer

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work that he thought might be an ivory bill's and wanted to explain how to find it. To my surprise, Dennis begged tiredness, asked the man to give the directions to me and left us.

We talked for a while; the man's description of the site was not persuasive. But clearly he wanted the bird to be found. "The ivory bill is not a significant factor in saving the Big Thicket—logically," he said. "But emotionally it's amazing what a rare bird can do."

I realized why Dennis had left us so abruptly. It dismayed him that anyone would want to make use of his search for any political purpose, even one in which he deeply believes. "Biologists shouldn't be involved in these things," Dennis had said once. He never explained why—Dennis is not adept with abstractions—but he is persistent in his attitude.

One day when the two of us went to an outdoor lunch in the woods, attended by a number of local people who were active in the conservation movement, he left in the middle of the non-stop talk and the next thing there he was in a beech tree, sitting up in it, hunched on a branch 30 feet above the ground and looking off into the canopy of leaves. We all stared at him. In our society grown men simply do not go around sitting in trees, but there he was, the loquacious folk below him tuned out, the forest tuned in and Dennis receiving loud and clear.

After a few more days—and miles of fruitless slogging—Dennis got an excited message from a local birdwatcher that an ivory bill's call had been heard in the Santee Swamp in South Carolina. Like the Big Thicket, the Santee was a wild area under pressure. Logging rights to a vast tract of the land had been recently sold and on the previous weekend a group of naturalists had explored the area to see just what, in the way of wildlife habitat, was going to be lost. One member of the party had played a tape of ivory bill call notes copied from an old recording, and from out of the swamp had come a faint response.

When we telephoned the man who'd played the recording—an Audubon Society representative—he explained that a group was going into the swamp on the coming weekend to attempt to verify the bird's presence, and that we could join them.

By the time we reached South Carolina, the sighting, or hearing, had already started to have effect. Upon publication of the report 200 people, mostly hunters and fishermen, reported that they, too, had seen the ivory bill in the Santee Swamp and they also protested the logging plans. When hunters and fishermen—an economic and political force, particularly in the South—start complaining, people listen. A moratorium was declared on the sale of the logging rights until the swamp's ecology could be surveyed.

We joined the party of ornithologists near Sumter. In bizarre alliance, duck hunters and bird watchers pressed into the swamp in flat-bottomed boats. From time to time we listened. One man tried to imitate the woodpecker's tinny, trumpetlike cry on a duck call. Others played tape-recorded call notes to the forest and listened in on parabolic reflectors which magnify the sound of any response—a standard ornithologist's technique. Dennis seemed high-strung. The presence of so many people, with the attendant noise and confusion, distressed him. "We'll never find the bird with a group this size," he said. "You just can't keep

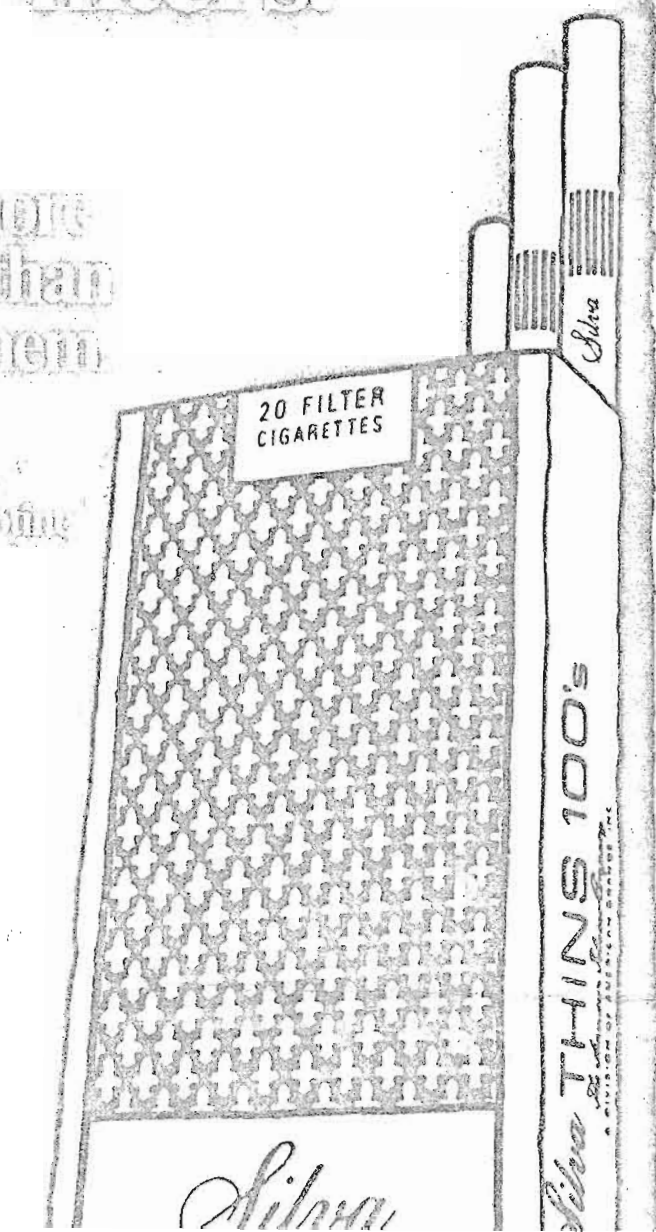
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A meeting with the 'dog people'

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ten very hard in the forest you hear a great deal, for the forest is never silent; the manic scream of a far-off red-shouldered hawk, the chirp of a squirrel, the rasp of a cricket frog. You sort out the confusion of sound, pick it apart and try to identify each element, listen for things even more subtle, until it feels as if your hearing is all stretched out, that it has reached back miles into the recesses of the swamp, and at that farthest edge it is lost, submerged in the remote sound of your body's own machinery.

No answer.

At nights the talk was of the bird. Flight, feeding, pattern of movements. One hearty woman, Annette Duchain, talked about her own searches for the ivory bill. More articulate than most, she seemed to come close to defining why people were involved in this odd quest. "I became obsessed with it," she said. "I never could believe that the last of those wonderful birds was gone. If the habitat had been sustained, we could have kept the species. We are likely to lose so many things. The question is, how much are we willing to fight to preserve habitat, not just for the ivory bill, but for the country we need to live in? It's not a question of ivory bills, it's a question of beauty."

In the Santee we neither heard nor saw any sign of an ivory bill. And so we returned to Texas and resumed our search. Out of my own romanticism I kept thinking that there would be one, only. One last ivory bill, like Faulkner's solitary bear, grizzled, wary as a fox, a real old slewfoot of a woodpecker who had watched the country change under his sharp eyes, and carefully moved ahead of that change ever deeper into the swamps.

Dennis was dogged. He plodded the woods, hands in his pockets, for all the world like a farmer on his back 40. I kept wanting to see him in heroic terms, a seeker of lost beauty, but he was not like that at all, did not analyze his own motives, seemed consumed by no inner fire. Yet he was stubborn, and methodical, and had this knotty integrity. Once he had attacked a federal agency which was spreading poison on an island where he was doing a banding study. The conservation organization he was working for—which had to deal with the federal agency frequently—had told him to keep quiet. He had refused, and quit his job—a point of honor, simply.

One evening a group of us, assembled at a small cabin far up the Neches River, heard hillbilly music blaring out of the night, out of the forest. Way back in the woods a pair of headlights bounced and jounced, a mufflerless engine roared.

"It's I.C.!" exclaimed Geraldine Watson. The battered pickup truck arrived with *Heartaches and Hangovers* blasting from a pair of loudspeakers on the roof. Out piled a small, rugged-looking backwoodsman, his large, rugged-looking wife, and a gaggle of kids.

Geraldine Watson explained that I. C. Eson knew where to find ivory bills, but I.C. had a few things he wanted to get off his chest first. I.C. was one of the "dog people." The dog people are nesters, old-timers who hunt with dogs and whose titles to their lands are precariously based on the fact that their parents or grandparents years ago squatted on the family acres. For a while I.C. talked about the damfools who have tried to

IL MATTERS IS THAT search goes on

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dollars to get a picture of it. Now why is that bird so important for? It ain't the ivory—that bill ain't worth the wood he pecks on." I explained that the bird was valuable because it was beautiful and rare. I.C. said, "Well, I know I can get a picture of one. Would that really be worth one thousand dollars?" I said that a good picture of the ivory bill would no doubt be worth a bit of money.

"What if he was dead?"

"No, I.C.," Geraldine said sternly. "You don't kill that bird. He's worth a lot alive but he's worth nothing dead."

I.C. grinned. "I'll get them pictures," he said. And then he gathered up his mountainous wife and gaggle of kids and roared off into the night, the old pickup cresting and bottoming like a boat in heavy seas.

My hopes had flagged by now. We had seen nothing but the fleeting glimpse of a bird which seemed to show more white than a pileated; the area left to search was impossibly vast. We found a fresh hole in a lightning-struck loblolly, with chips thrown 40 feet from the tree, and staked it out one morning. Eventually a black-and-white bird appeared and gave its morning cry; a pileated. A prominent lawyer told us that he had seen ivory bills regularly: every afternoon they flew to an island on his property. We staked that out, and at 2:30, right on schedule, two big birds flew in from across the river. "Pileateds," Dennis said. "So much for that."

One night we camped on Pine Island Bayou, and as the dark pressed in beyond the circle of the campfire, the owls were everywhere. The cry of a barred owl tugs at your innards; like the call of a loon, it touches something primitive. One boomed its eight-note call from across the bayou, another answered from half a mile upstream, a third joined in nearby, and then it became impossible to tell how many there were, for the calls were reverberating all over the dark forest, as if all the owls in creation had come to this spot on this night to put on a performance so furious, so demented, that the hairs rose on the back of my neck.

"Just listen to that," Dennis said, and for a long time we did. After a while the owls' Wagnerian concert began to diminish, and Dennis went to his sleeping bag, but I am addicted to campfires and it was pleasant to sit on the upturned pirogue and stare into the depths of the pine-knot coals. One owl, far off, still boomed from time to time, as if trying to persuade his brothers to join him again, but he had no success; the orchestra had dispersed for the hunt, and they were out there now, ghosting softly through the loblollies and the water oaks, over the Chi-

nese tallow thickets and the smilax tangles, smooth and quiet as moths.

My search for the ivory-billed woodpecker was over; after a month in the Big Thicket of Texas and the Santec Swamp of South Carolina, I was giving up. I thought of Dennis and his search, and wondered whether he would ever find the bird. In my mind's eye an image persisted. It was of Dennis deep in an untracked swamp at dusk, sitting 50 feet up in a tall tree he has climbed, getting just that extra distance between him and the world of men, his legs and arms entwined with the tree, gaunt, waiting. From the depths of the swamp comes the trumpet call, and then the bird itself, the last ivory bill, emerges from the dark and towering forest, wings flickering white in the gloom, the crest aflame, the beak a gleaming dagger. It alights on a neighboring tree, cocks its head and with its bright strong eye observes the man. They watch each other, eyes locked together, neither moving. At last the bird turns and feeds for a time, and then, when it is finished, it flexes its great wings, launches into space and away, receding like a flashing arrow into the swamp and the gathering dark.

And yet—perhaps it didn't matter whether Dennis found the bird or not. What did matter was that he continued looking. In a way, the bird means more as an idea than it ever could as a reality. A real ivory bill would be observed and trailed, reported upon in scientific journals and the popular press. Its economic worth would be tabulated with precision, resolutions to save it would be debated in Congress, perhaps experiments of artificial insemination would be performed upon it. One does not wish to see it poked and prodded so, reduced from a myth and a metaphor to a curiosity. If the question of its existence remains unanswered it will continue to range the back country of the mind, and those who wish to trail it there can find it in their visions.

It was easy to be fanciful that night, to sit at the campfire and feel those surges in the blood that can come in wild places, to look into the owl-inhabited dark and the pine-knot coals and imagine the great old wilderness, to glide in my mind through a forest that once ran unbroken for a thousand miles from the coastal plain almost to the hundredth meridian.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of a high, distant whine, like a persistent mosquito. Dennis was already up, poking at the embers of the fire. "Listen," he said. "We're surrounded by chain saws."

Dennis waits, and listens for the trumpet call

