



MUSTARD GREENS

Spicy mustard plants produce a slew of naturally occurring compounds, some similar to those in expensive commercial fumigants used to deter potato-damaging pests, according to recent studies. This, in turn, has researchers lauding mustard as a promising "bio-fumigant." Farmers plant the mustard crops in late summer, cut them later in the fall, and quickly till them into the soil, exploiting the valuable compounds released by the plants. Inspired by field trials at Washington State University, researchers from the University of Idaho, the Shoshone-Bannock tribe, and other organizations are testing so-called "green manure" mustard crops in the country's biggest potato-producing state to see if they offer cost-effective potato protection against worms, fungi, and weeds. If so, it will be another coup for green manure, which is already known to increase soil quality, decrease erosion, and reduce fertilizer dependency, explains Pamela Hutchinson, a member of the University of Idaho research team. "Potato growers out here are really good stewards of the land," she says, and "if green manure can help them reduce costs and improve the soil, then they're all for it." —Andrea Anderson

DREAM HOUSE

The Mall in Washington, D.C., will be even more welcoming this October when 20 student teams from around the world compete to design and build the ultimate energy-efficient, solar-powered home. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, the so-called Solar Decathlon is the third contest of its kind since 2002 (www.eere.energy.gov/solar_decathlon). One home in the village, Penn State University's "Morning Star" will be sweeter than most, thanks to a "pocket-habitat" garden resulting from a collaboration between Penn

THE IVORY-BILL

Giving Up the Ghost?

On a sunny early May morning in 2005, near the White River in Arkansas, David Sibley's heart began pounding when he glimpsed a large black-and-white woodpecker swoop into a leafy oak tree 100 yards away. It was unmistakable: the trailing edge of the wings appeared to be white, the pattern of an ivory-billed woodpecker. But when Sibley got within 30 yards of the tree, a pileated woodpecker flew out. Still, he was so intoxicated by the brief view, he recalls, that "there was definitely a strong desire to ignore the more cautious voices in my head to say, that was 'good enough,' and to convince myself that I must have seen an ivory-bill."

Sibley, the famed birding-guide author and illustrator, had rushed to Arkansas within days of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's announcement that the ivory-bill had been rediscovered. The Cornell Lab offered seven sightings and a grainy four-second video as proof that at least one ivory-billed woodpecker still lived in the Cache River basin. Skeptics, however, have since dissected the video and found it inconclusive, at best. Now Sibley wonders if anyone ever saw an ivory-bill. "At this point I have to guess it was all wishful thinking," he says.

After two years of intensive searching by Cornell researchers and others, the ivory-bill has yet to be seen again. The dragnet has added up to more than 27,000 hours of audio recordings and more than 50,000 hours logged by searchers covering 70,000 acres in Arkansas, and still the Cornell Lab doesn't have a clear-cut photo. "It strains the limits of belief," says another bird-guide author and Audubon field editor Kenn Kaufman. "Someone should have had something by now."

But Cornell researchers are pleading for patience. "This is a species for which a concerted, exhaustive range-wide search had been long, long overdue," John Fitzpatrick, a highly respected ornithologist and the Cornell Lab's director, wrote Audubon in a recent email. A four-person mobile team extended the effort across the Southeast this year and plans to continue searching in promising habitat at least through next year. Fitzpatrick defends the effort because he regards "the timeless value that could be gained by locating one or more remnant breeding pairs of ivory-billed woodpeckers as, quite literally, priceless."

Nobody wants to write the bird's final obituary, so the question now is how much longer should the search go on? Some critics think it's time for Cornell to give up the ghost. "People like to say that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, but there is no absence of evidence," says Sibley. "They've got 50,000 hours of zeroes. At some point, that becomes evidence that the bird is not there." But Ron Rohrbaugh, who is directing the Cornell Lab's effort, said it would be "a terrible mistake" to end the quest if there is even the slightest chance the ivory-bill is out there—somewhere, anywhere. —Ted O'Callahan



Southern Discomfort

by Noah K. Strycker

The alarm clock blares at 5 a.m. in the frigid winter darkness of the Florida Panhandle swamp, blasting me out of a nightmare: Ivory-billed Woodpeckers dancing in front of my camera *with no film*. I haven't changed clothes in five days. The odor in my tent is daunting, tempered only by the subfreezing air. Condensed breath ice crystals drift down from the ceiling when the tent shakes.

Still wrapped in my sleeping bag, I roll over and throw down 50 push-ups to get the blood circulating. With gritted teeth, I shove my body into a pair of rain pants and another sweater, pull on chest waders and rubber boots, slap on a hat and a headlamp, grab my GPS unit and bolt from the tent toward hot oatmeal.

The day's activity begins for the 13 of us stationed at Camp *Turdus* Mound—named for the robins that infest the nearby berry bushes—in an undisclosed location in the Choctawhatchee River basin, perhaps the last stronghold of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

When Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology researchers reported living ivory-bills in an Arkansas swamp in April 2005, the public response was tremendous. A pixelated video released as hard evidence proved unconvincing, however, and the hunt was on to capture indisputable documentation.

The Cornell team returned to the swamp but with disappointing results. Where were the birds?

Meanwhile, an under-the-radar effort from Auburn University fielded a search crew and released evidence suggesting that ivory-bills could be found in the Florida



In Florida, Strycker joined the Auburn University search for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers.

Panhandle. I salivated over the reports and immediately volunteered to join the Auburn team, with the single-minded purpose of photographing that peckerwood myself.

This is how I came to spend the Christmas and New Year's holidays chest-deep in murky swampwater, combing the cypress, tupelo and oak trees for any sign of the black-and-white, crested bird that flies like a Northern Pintail. In 10 days of dogged searching, I figured that I had a decent chance of hearing or seeing the elusive quarry. I was buoyed by reports the previous week of double knocks (the typical ivory-bill territorial sound) and one sighting of a flying bird.

I felt like a secret agent on a mission as I was met at the airport and driven to a bunkhouse, where I spent the night before kayaking down the brown river to the camp. The river journey can be dangerous.

Our search for the ivory-bill followed a simple daily routine. After rising in the predawn hours, we fanned out into the swampy landscape a couple of square miles around the camp. We searched alone to maximize coverage of the area, sitting, walking slowly or kayaking through flooded sections. I spent most of the day, including lunchtime, listening and sitting quietly because the birds are known to be extremely wary.

Poisonous cottonmouth and diamond-back snakes roam the swamps — as well as alligators, wild pigs and bears — and the rock-hard “knees” protruding into the water from cypress tree roots can whack your shins to a pulp. I quickly learned, however, that the greatest danger in the

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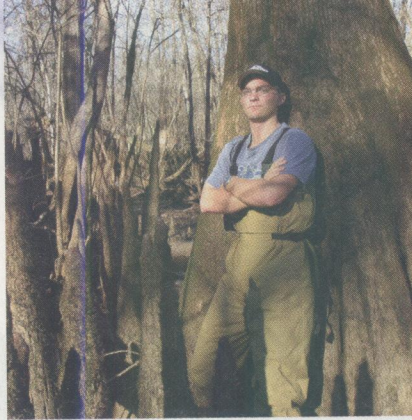
swamp is getting lost. Seriously.

We navigated with Garmin Rino 120 GPS units, which allow you to see where you are and where everyone else is at any given time. While I was there, a volunteer at a different study site got lost in a 5-acre swamp on New Year's Eve and was found, thoroughly embarrassed, at midnight by the county sheriff and search-and-rescue teams.

I carried my camera around my neck at all times, cocked and ready to shoot. I turned off image stabilization and used a 300mm lens without extenders, a manual focus preset to near infinity, a digital body with continuous shooting up to five frames per second, a 400 ISO setting and a wide-open aperture for fast shutter speed.

I practiced by photographing every Pileated Woodpecker in sight. One day, I saw more than 10 Pileateds, more than I had seen in one place.

The place was lousy with woodpeckers: Red-bellied, Red-headed, Pileated, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers; Northern Flickers; and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. Their incessant *tap-tap-tap* provided the soundtrack to my search.



On a typical morning, I'd tiptoe through the forest, trying not to crunch too loudly on the dry leaves, trip over submerged cypress knees, wade the occasional stream (praying not to fall in and dunk my camera) and spend long periods waiting and watching. During these watches, I sometimes was bored out of my mind.

I sifted through mixed flocks of wintering warblers, vireos, chickadees, creepers, titmice and other songbirds. I philosophized about this so-called Lord God bird. Always I listened, hoping for that distinctive *kent* call or double knock.

In the stillness of the swamp, I saw my life Rusty Blackbird, my first wild armadillo, a river otter, a lot of deer and more

hunters than deer. I ate grits, took a nap on Spanish moss, avoided snakes and rang in the New Year with catfish and marshmallows cooked over a campfire.

Alas, I never saw or heard an ivory-bill, but I experienced the thrill of the search first-hand and resolved to return. I was impressed with the organization, intelligence, integrity and hard work of the search team, and my initial skepticism has been replaced with the belief that ivory-bills exist in Florida.

It's only a matter of time until someone nabs The Photograph. Who knows? Maybe it will be me.

And One More Thing

The ivory-bill researchers ask birders not to enter the study area or mimic ivory-bill sounds anywhere in the Choctawhatchee River basin. To find out more about Auburn's search efforts and how you can support it, visit www.auburn.edu/ivorybill **wb**

College junior Noah K. Strycker writes about, photographs, draws and studies birds in Oregon and elsewhere.



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