In the pre-dawn hours of 19 December 1940, James T. Tanner drove his 1939 Chevy along Sharkey Road in the Singer Tract of northeastern Louisiana. This was one of the last bottomland hardwood forests in the South, and, even after scouring 45 sites and traveling 45,000 miles in search of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, this was the only place he could find them. Jim had spent the preceding three years studying the colony here, and he wanted to show the birds to his fiancée, Nancy Burnham Sheedy.

When the couple arrived at John’s Bayou, Jim led Nancy into the woods. They slogged through the winter mud, hefted themselves over bulky logs, and shed themselves through briars until Jim found a good place to wait for the woodpeckers.

In the darkness, Barred Owls called, “Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?” At sunrise Brown Thrashers, White-breasted Nuthatches, White-throated Sparrows, and Carolina Wrens called. Then woodpeckers rapped and called.

“Finally, after the sun came up, we heard the Ivory-bill; but we didn’t see it,” Nancy, now 89, recalls.

They spent the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon searching for that bird. But they never found it. However, Jim did find a fresh roost hole—a promising sign of an Ivory-bill. The couple decided to return to nearby Tallulah and revisit the forest the next morning before sunrise.

In the darkness of the next dawn, they repeated their muddy trek. Before the sun rose, they seated themselves thirty feet from the auspicious tree.

“We saw the male come out, go to the top of the tree, preen and stretch, and then BAM bam,” Nancy says. She remembers that the woodpecker’s second bam struck so quickly that it was more like an echo of the first than a bam all its own.

“The male was so gorgeous,” she recalls. After he called, the female, in response to her mate’s summons, appeared from her roost hole in a nearby tree.

“They sort of cooed and goooed a little,” Nancy says of the communication between the birds. She says their kent kent sounded as if it were a loud Red-breasted Nuthatch. After the two massive woodpeckers communed, they flew through...
Acrylic on Masonite by © Ray Nelson.
the woods with the direct fast flight of a Northern Pin-tail. “Jim called them wooden wings, because it sounded like wood banging against the wind.”

“Stay there,” Jim said. He bolted after the birds.

Nancy was alone in the primal forest. Alligators filled bayous. Cougars hunted deer. And Spanish moss cloaked gargantuan cypress trees. She wondered what she would do if Jim failed to return.

During the hours that passed, Winter Wrens, Wood Ducks, and a Wild Turkey entertained her. “Then I saw something as dark and tall as a horse,” she recalls. “I realized it was a wolf on top of a log. I thought, If I am real lucky, maybe I’ll see a panther and a bear and a bobcat.”

During their one-week visit in 1940, the Tanners spent every day in the tract and found a total of five Ivory-bills. One was the legendary Sonny Boy [see p. 29], a male Jim had banded in 1938 after the fledgling had fluttered in terror from its nest hole upon seeing Jim stare in at it. Jim used the opportunity to slip on a leg band. The Tanners also found a mated pair, their young, and another male.

The next December, in 1941, the Tanners spent two weeks scouring the Singer Tract. They couldn’t find any males and found only two females; one was a yearling and the other was her mother.

The reason for the population reduction wasn’t difficult to ascertain. Logging had intensified in the Singer Tract. As the trees fell, so did the number of Ivory-bills.

In the 1930s, the National Audubon Society wanted to save the big woodpeckers. But they needed to know more about the Ivory-bills, what they required to survive. Audubon granted Jim Tanner a fellowship to study the species. For three years, he lived among the Ivory-bills. He documented what they ate, what trees they roosted in, and what habitat they preferred. He drew up his observations in a dissertation that earned him a doctorate in ornithology from Cornell.

He found that Ivory-bills favored the larvae of the kinds of beetles that lay their eggs only under the bark of dead and dying trees in southern bottomland hardwood forests. They used their bills like levers, wedged away chunks of bark, and nibbled up the uncovered larvae. But dead and dying trees are common only in large stands of mature woods. As they disappeared, so did the nesting sites for the larvae and the Ivory-bills that ate them.

The Singer Sewing Machine Company owned the Singer Tract. They had owned forests then so they could harvest timber to make wooden cabinets for their sewing machines. But the company had never cut in the Singer Tract. In fact, they had barred logging there, and wardens patrolled the area. But Singer sold the forest to the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company in 1937. This new owner, with its focus on lumber sales, unleashed the saws. They felled every tree that had market value. What had been, only a few years before, one of the last virgin bottomland forests in the South—and the only one where Jim had seen Ivory-bills—was transformed into soybean fields and slash.

The Ivory-bill wasn’t the only animal eradicated from the tract. Farmers and ranchers perceived cougars and wolves as a threat to livestock and people, and they snared and shot all of them.

D. D. Arnold, now 84, grew up in Warsaw, Louisiana, only a few miles from the Singer Tract. Although there were “No Trespassing” signs and wardens, D. D. used to sneak in to hunt deer, turkeys, raccoons, and squirrels—anything that he and his family could eat. “We went to the grocery store to buy coffee and sugar,” he remembers. “But you didn’t buy much of what you eat, because you killed it out in the woods.”

Sometimes, while he was hunting, he’d see the Ivory-bills. “Sometimes you’d see one flyin’ from tree to tree. But I wasn’t too interested in him, ’cause I wasn’t fixin’ to kill him and eat him.”

He saw the Ivory-bills until he enlisted in the Army in
1942. “When I come back (in 1947), there wasn’t none left; they done cut the timber.”

He recalls when wolves and cougars and Ivory-bills roamed the Singer Tract. He remembers the last wolf he saw, a black-colored one, caught in a leg trap around 1950. “He’d been in there for several days...I got down off my horse, got me a stick, and knocked him in the head, and throw’d him, trap and all, out in the thicket.”

D. D. remembers shooting a panther with a .22-caliber rifle on the dummy line—a secondary train track—in the late 1930s “because it was there, and I was.”

He saw his last panther in the tract in the early 1950s after returning on Sharkey Road from the grain elevator in Tallulah, where he had dropped off a load of beans.

These days, D. D. drives tractors and cleans up around the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge—which used to be the Singer Tract—which is now open to hunters, birders, and other visitors.

At the refuge, you can stand in many of the same places where the Tanners and others stood. But you would not see what the Tanners and their contemporaries saw more than 65 years ago. There are saw palmetto forests and Spanish moss draping trees; and there are water tupelo, cypress, and sweet gum; and there are Pileated Woodpeckers, deer, and bear. But there is also a noisy silence, one that echoes the powerful missing voices: the vanished virgin stands of decades ago, and the banished calls of wolves, cougars, and Ivory-bills.

The South still has Pileated Woodpeckers, and so do many other parts of the country; but the Ivory-bill—after the extinction of the Imperial Woodpecker in Mexico—was the largest woodpecker in North America. It was up to 20 inches long, had a 31-inch wingspan, and could weigh more than a pound-and-a-quarter. The Ivory-bill was up to 15 percent longer, had a wingspan almost 15 percent wider, and could weigh 80% more than the Pileated. The difference between the two birds was profound.

More than forty years later and thousands of bird experiences after he saw the Ivory-bills, he wrote in his famous Birds Over America, “This was no puny Pileated; this was a whacking big bird...” He went on to write, in a reminiscence that Nancy Tanner recently came across, “What then was my most exciting bird experience? Without question it involved the Ivory-billed Woodpecker...”

The Singer Tract did not fall without protest. Jim Tanner, the National Audubon Society, the governors of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, the Roosevelt administration, and several federal agencies objected. Louisiana even offered to buy $200,000 worth of the forest as a preserve for the remaining Ivory-bills. But the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company refused the offer and logged without restraint.

Don Eckelberry was a wildlife artist with the Audubon Society. He is cited as the last naturalist to have seen an Ivory-bill in the Singer Tract. He sketched that last known bird during two weeks in April 1944 at John’s Bayou, one of the places where Tanner had studied them. Although Eckelberry died six years ago, there

Roger Tory Peterson was the twentieth century’s John James Audubon. During his lifetime, Peterson saw two Ivory-bills, and he saw them both in the Singer Tract in 1942. He went there then because he wanted to see them before they vanished forever.
were two boys who had tagged along with him one day, and they remember their experience.

Bill Fought and Bob Faught—a paperwork snafu at birth created the different spellings of their family names—were 14 and 9, respectively, in 1944. Their dad worked as a locomotive engineer for the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company. The family lived at the logging camp, which had homes, machine shops, a boarding house, a commissary, car shops, and a water tank along Sharkey Road. The boys were playing at the camp one April day, when Jessie Laird, a game warden with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, who patrolled the Singer Tract, pulled up in his Jeep. He introduced the boys to his passenger, Don Eckelberry, who was 23 at the time. Eckelberry wore a western-style outfit, whipcord riding pants, and tall lace-up riding boots. Jessie said Mr. Eckelberry was on his way to see the Ivory-bill, and he asked the boys if they wanted to come along. They did.

The boys followed Don to the roost tree, which was only a quarter mile from the logging camp. “He had a real bad limp,” Bob recalls. Eckelberry appeared self-conscious about this disability, which barred him from service in the military during World War II.

They had to walk a short way off the road, wading through water up to their ankles, to get to the roost tree. “We must have got there around one o’clock,” Bill, now 76, says. “It was after lunch.” While they waited, Don told them about the Ivory-bill, and he sketched an image of Bob, and drew pictures of wolves and other animals.

“I hear her,” Don said. “Let’s be quiet now; let’s stop our talking. Let the bird come on in.”

The hen Ivory-bill landed on a tree about 60 feet away. She didn’t stay long before she flew off again. After a few minutes, she returned to her roost snag. Unsettled, the bird flew again into the woods. Finally, she returned to the snag one last time that night, just below her roost hole. She pecked a couple of times, then hitched up the snag, and disappeared into her hole. She poked her head out, and then retired for the night.

“By then it was getting late,” Bill remembers.

Don told the boys, “Unfortunately, this is something that not everybody gets a chance to witness; it may be the last of a species, the last one of a kind.”

“I just thought it would be a sad thing to be the last of anything on earth,” Bill states.

Bob, who is now 72, says the logging camp seemed to be along the Ivory-bills’ route. “They flew across the railroad tracks on a regular basis,” he remembers. When they pecked, it sounded like “a ball-peen hammer rapping on trees.”

Before Don’s visit, Bob couldn’t have said what the difference was between the Ivory-bills and the Pileateds, but he had always noticed that the two species made a different noise. “When he slammed the trees, it was like a gun going off,” Bob says. “A Pileated is loud, but not like that... When you get the two together—the Ivory-bill and the Pileated—there is no doubt it was a different bird.”

Gene Laird, 76, is Jessie’s oldest child. The Lairds lived near Methiglum Bayou, not far from John’s Bayou. Jessie, who died in 2000, had asked Gene to check on the Ivory-bill several times a week. Gene would sometimes see the female flutter around the topless and naked snag, go into her roost hole, and poke her head out. One day, after a small storm, Gene rode to the snag and noticed that it had toppled.

“It wasn’t much of a storm, just a little wind,” he says. Gene never saw the Ivory-bill after that.

After Don Eckelberry left the Singer Tract, Gene cleaned out the Cochran camp house on Sharkey Road, where the artist had stayed. Eckelberry had left a pile of sketches, of gray wolves, Wild Turkeys, and Downy Woodpeckers. “I just put everything on a bonfire,” Gene says.

Of the last Ivory-bill, Gene says, “She was important because she was the last of the Mohicans, so to speak.”