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Herbert Stoddard's Search for the Lost Spirit of the Southern Wilderness

BY FREDRIK BRYNTESSON, WILLIAM C. HUNTER AND JIM COX

MAINTAINING A SECRET CAN BE A BURDENSOME task for a scientist. In a profession that thrives upon new discoveries and near-constant outside review, suppressing information can gnaw at the psyche like some malignant growth. Failure to place a glistening piece of break-through information before the public's eye seems to run counter to the philosophy of scientific inquiry — except when the information might threaten an endangered species.

Such was the dilemma that Herbert Stoddard and many of his colleagues faced in the mid-1900s. The rapacious clearing of forests that took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s led to staggering losses of native wildlife. Stoddard and his peers grew up in an era when many native species were struggling to survive as our country transformed from a collection of small agrarian communities into a manufacturing behemoth. In his youth, Stoddard had chances, albeit slim, to see Bachman's Warblers, Passenger Pigeons, and Carolina Parakeets. By the time he was fully engaged with his career during the early 1900s, chances of seeing these and other species were vanishingly small.

One of the rare species that plunged Stoddard into deep, guarded silence toward the end of his career was the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the largest woodpecker to have inhabited the US. Known as the *Lord God Bird* because of its size, the black-and-white Ivory-billed once ranged across the remote wild swamps, bottomland forests, and mature pinewoods of the southeastern US. Stoddard became familiar with Ivory-bills during his childhood in the wild frontier of Orange and Seminole Counties, Florida, and later recounted that he “had seen at least 12 to 15 in the Fort Christmas region” during his boyhood years. He suggested there might have been more in this area that today supports the burgeoning suburbs of Orlando. But with the characteristic scrutiny that



would guide his professional career, he added "... some may have been repeats of the same birds or families."

Searching for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers became a regular part of Herbert Stoddard's life until he passed away in 1970. As he once noted, "I know of no keener or worthwhile problem than assisting in working out the present status of this most spectacular bird."

Except for a tight-knit group of close friends and colleagues, however, few knew about the information and insights that Stoddard amassed in pursuit of the Lord God Bird. As noted in his memoirs, "The ivory-billed woodpecker was always in my mind. I searched for it at every opportunity, especially in and near the larger cypress swamps." He was realistic about the probability of locating such a rare bird in the vast areas of the Southern wilderness and likened it to be like, "looking for a needle in a hay stack" and then added, "but what could be more fun?" However, he kept the information close to his chest because he feared the information might be used for great

harm rather than good. In his youth, he had observed the uncontrolled slaughter of wildlife in the wild lands of central Florida. Later on, his work with museums throughout North America convinced him that shotguns in the hands of curators and others also had played a role in the demise of Ivory-bills. In fact, soon after Stoddard arrived in the Red Hills region, two Florida Ivory-billed Woodpeckers would be shot and sold to the University of Florida, along with a purported nest tree, for \$175 (equivalent to about \$2,500 today).

While Stoddard kept many of his observations to himself, the archival materials housed at Tall Timbers (especially Stoddard's own letters, memo's, notes etc.) provide great new insights about Stoddard's thoughts, knowledge, and searches for ivory-bills. We also have information from many of Stoddard's peers, including Leon Neel, Whitney Eastman, Alexander Sprunt, and John Dennis, who published accounts of Stoddard's many searches. These accounts described searches along the Santee River in 1935 and along the Chipola and Apalachicola River systems in the 1950s. Stoddard also briefly mentions searches in Florida, Georgia, and Texas during his adult life, but what he saw is largely a mystery. These were not random adventures; they were purposeful endeavors that Stoddard undertook when he received a promising sighting or when he had a brief, tantalizing look at a large black-and-white woodpecker. Then there are the three Ivory-bills that Stoddard mentions seeing in "the last fifteen years" in his autobiography. Archives and interviews with those working with Stoddard at the time have put more meat on the skeletal fragments he left behind and reaffirm Stoddard's tremendous importance to the new conservation ethos emerging in North America.

Sprunt, Storms, and the Santee River

One of the people who searched regularly for Ivory-bills with Stoddard was Alexander Sprunt, a leading figure in the fledgling National Audubon Society and one of Stoddard's closest ornithological colleagues. Much like Stoddard, Sprunt never prospered in academics, but he was a prolific writer and consummate naturalist. In 1928, an Ivory-bill was reported at Wakulla Beach after a hurricane had struck and killed hundreds of trees. Stoddard and Sprunt searched the area in vain for one day, but Stoddard found evidence of the peculiar bark stripping Ivory-bills were known to perform.



Above, Herbert Stoddard c. 1961. Tall Timbers Archives. Previous page, Ivory-billed Woodpecker specimens at the Florida Natural History Museum in Gainesville, Fla. Photo by Fredrik Bryntesson

"I did see many trees almost stripped of bark that I feel quite sure was ivory-bill work," Stoddard noted, "as I had seen the birds previously in my boyhood where they had almost completely de-barked dying pine timber." Stoddard described the torn bark as being similar to what "...a man might leave who knocked off the bark with a cross hatching motion with a heavy screwdriver...." The process was thought to yield a trove of beetles and their larvae just beneath the bark.

In the mid-1930s Stoddard and Sprunt participated in a large-scale search for Ivory-bills along the Santee River in South Carolina. George Malamphy, a turkey biologist working in the area, had contacted Stoddard and Sprunt with the remarkable news that he had seen both Ivory-billed Woodpeckers and Carolina Parakeets. The Ivory-bill had not been seen in South Carolina in many years, while the Carolina Parakeet was long presumed to be extinct.

Sprunt had questions about the sighting, but Stoddard was keenly interested in conducting follow-up work. The two visited the Santee River in March 1935 and proceeded to travel with Malamphy from the mouth of the Santee to the area where Malamphy had seen the birds. Sightings of the birds eluded them, but both Stoddard and Sprunt thought the area contained excellent habitat and were excited about the possibilities. The Santee is one of the largest rivers on the east coast and included during the 1930s some of the largest expanses of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest remaining in the southeastern United States. Sprunt returned to the river in May and saw a male Ivory-bill in flight and then heard the birds on the following day. The rare discovery led to the establishment of the Santee Sanctuary in 1936, a National Audubon Sanctuary with two wardens in place to protect the Ivory-bills from over-zealous collectors and other threats.

Ivory-bills were seen in the sanctuary with some regularity for two additional years. Stoddard was fascinated with the reports and, in his words, took "...every opportunity to go into the Santee Swamp with Sprunt as I am intensely interested in [this] whole matter. But have been very careful to keep the matter quiet, and prevent knowledge of the situation there from spreading."

Sightings of the Ivory-bills in the area began to decline around 1937. Efforts to locate a nest also had not met with success and led Stoddard to the conclusion that the Ivory-bills that had been encountered along the

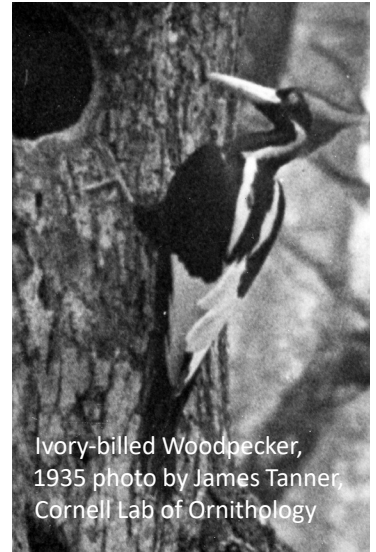
Santee were "wandering birds" and thus not permanent residents of the area, a recurring theme in the search for Ivory-bills. The Santee Sanctuary was officially closed in April 1938, but people can still experience a sense of primeval conditions present in Stoddard's day by visiting the old-growth forest that has been protected along the Santee through the creation of Congaree National Park.

A Nest, a Student, and Flickers of Hope

A few years earlier in 1932, Ivory-bills were sighted in the Singer Tract in eastern Louisiana. Follow-up surveys by Arthur Allen, founder of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and a 21-year-old graduate student named James Tanner led to the discovery of a nest in 1935 that held out hope for recovering the lost spirit of southern wilderness.

Tanner initiated a doctoral study that included intensive monitoring of the Ivory-bills on the Singer Tract as well as extensive surveys elsewhere in the southeast. Tanner and Allen visited Stoddard during some of the initial forays into the southeast and recognized the importance of the information he had amassed. Tanner wrote Stoddard, before beginning his doctoral research, in 1936 asking... "Have you heard of any recent reports of the birds, and do you know of any places that would bear investigation? ... Professor Allen and I will both be glad to hear from you about this."

Stoddard was excited about the project and responded quickly. "I cannot imagine a more fascinating assignment," he said. He recommended surveys along the Altamaha River in Georgia, the Savannah River in South Carolina, and the Wacissa River and the Wakulla Beach in Florida. Stoddard also noted several additional areas that seemed promising. "In order of importance in my mind," he wrote, "I would place the rest of the Santee, the Savannah... most of the Altamaha...the section around the borders of the Okefenokee Swam[p]... the whole Gulf Hammock section of Florida (I do not know the best locations to try in south Florida) from about Apalachicola to Cedar Keys, and probably further, and



Ivory-billed Woodpecker,
1935 photo by James Tanner,
Cornell Lab of Ornithology



[Click here to view a video](#) of a male and female Ivory-billed Woodpecker at their nest cavity, taken by Arthur Allen in 1935, at the Singer Tract in Louisiana. Arthur A. Allen/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Apalachicola River. Photo by Fredrik Bryntesson

probably some of the wilder swamps of Alabama and western Florida.” In Stoddard’s view, these were some of best southern wilderness landscapes where Ivory-bills might be holding on, but he also knew a comprehensive search would be nearly impossible.

“The area where they may possibly occur at present in the Southeast is simply tremendous, not restricted as many believe...,” he wrote. “I can best answer your question of possibilities by stating that if I had the rest of my life for the purpose, I doubt that I could cover *adequately* a half [of] the ground I now think worth investigating.”

In reference to his Santee experience, Stoddard recounted, “I have in mind five days I have spent personally looking especially for these birds with such men as Robert Allen and Alexander Sprunt on an area of some ten thousand acres known to be frequented by several pairs of these birds, without seeing one,” he added, “Of course this was due to the element of luck, as others have gone in the same area for a few hours and seen one or two. But it indicates the time one would have to spend in these great river valleys to really be reasonably sure that the birds were absent, or even extremely rare therein.”

Tanner visited Stoddard several times and regularly corresponded with him. Stoddard suggested field methods that involved locating the best surviving hardwood

forests along rivers but also consulting with local foresters. He suggested to “question timber estimators, and especially reliable hardwood cruisers... as to the present status of the virgin and other big timber left. Then investigate these areas on the basis of ecological conditions, nearby populations, inaccessibility, and local information obtainable. I will be tremendously surprised if there are not a few scattered birds in areas of big timber along most of these River Swamps and more isolated hammocks.”

Stoddard hoped to visit Tanner in the Singer Tract to see “the big timber and the Ivory Williams (a nickname Stoddard sometimes used for Ivory-bills).” He even successfully applied for a permit to visit the area in 1939. However, on both occasions he was unable to make the trip due to his busy schedule. Protection of the Singer Tract was a top priority, but logging rights had already been sold to the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company. A valiant campaign was launched by National Audubon that raised \$200,000 to purchase the timber rights back, but the company refused the offer and proceeded with plans. A lone female was seen on the tract in 1944 that served as the last universally accepted report, with suggestive but unconfirmed reports continuing for only a few years thereafter.



Chipola River Wildlife Sanctuary Area. Photo by Fredrik Bryntesson

Another Encounter, Another Sanctuary

Some of the most thorough descriptions of Stoddard's involvement in searches for the Ivory-Williams come from work on the Chipola and Apalachicola Rivers in the early 1950s. Much like the Santee River in South Carolina, the Apalachicola/Chipola river systems represented one of the largest unmarred river systems left in the southeastern United States at the time as well as some of the highest biological diversity hotspots found in North America.

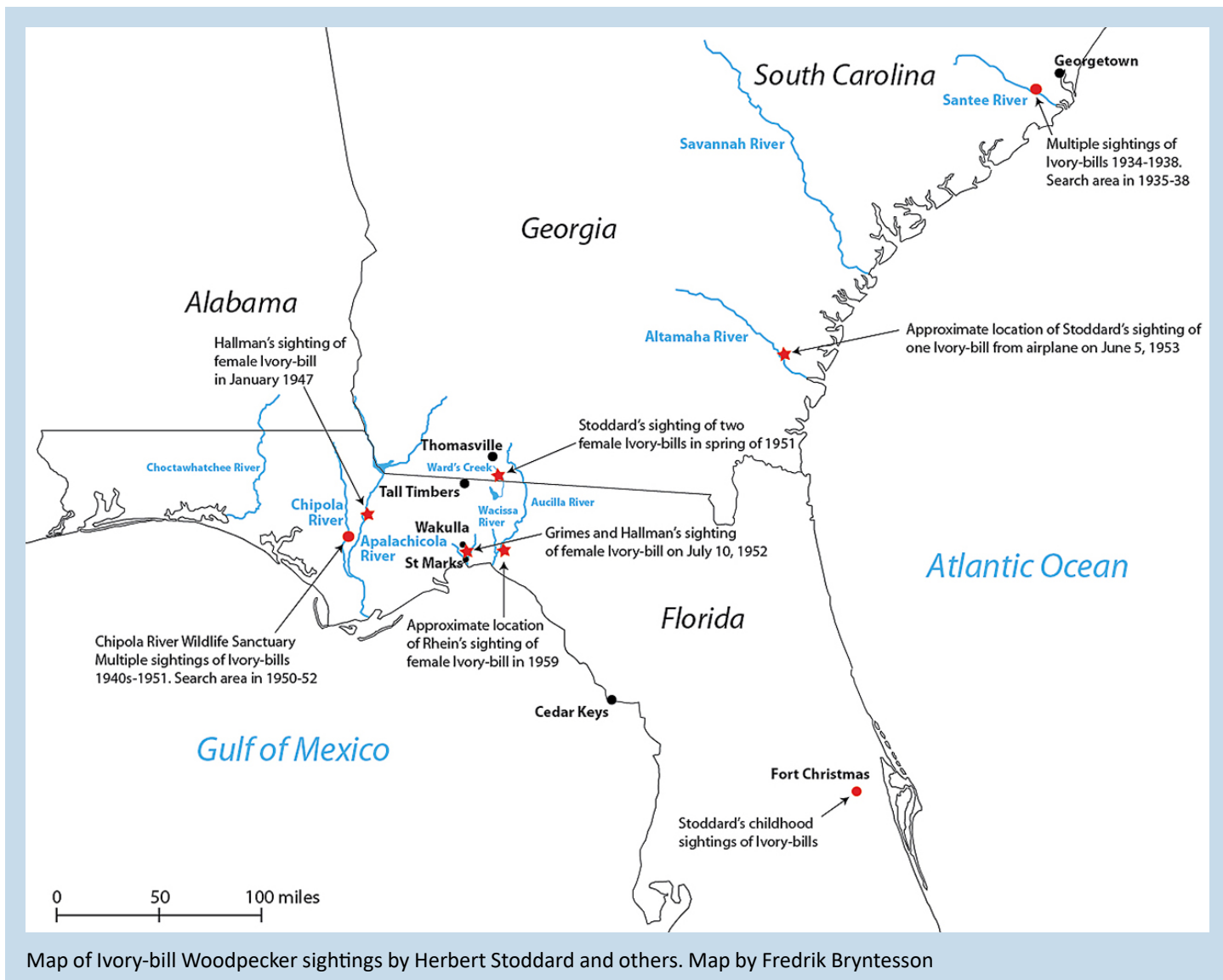
Indirect evidence dating back to the 1930s suggested the Apalachicola River might support a few individuals, but a new lead emerged in 1950 when Ivory-bill searcher Whitney Eastman reported that Ivory-bills had been seen near Scotts Ferry on the nearby Chipola River. The area was searched by others over the next couple of years and evidence was amassed that ranged from brief glimpses to more detailed descriptions of the birds. The observations included sightings of a pair of adults, which provided new hope that a nest might eventually be found. Accordingly, a very optimistic National Audubon Society established the Chipola River Wildlife Sanctuary in October 1950.

However, the excitement soon gave way to doubt. A team formed by James Tanner and Robert Porter Allen investigated the sanctuary and nearby areas along the Apalachicola in December 1950 and found meager evidence at best of Ivory-billed Woodpecker use of the area and none to suggest birds were resident or nesting

there. National Audubon organized a follow up survey that included Stoddard and others, but this effort yielded similarly desultory results. Stoddard was not surprised because he firmly believed that although Ivory-bills had been observed in the area, one had to be lucky in order to see the birds. He urged leaders at National Audubon to continue to support the sanctuary until more thorough searches could be conducted. He even offered to conduct this follow-up search free of charge "... due to my intense interest in the matter and sincere desire to cooperate with all concerned...."

National Audubon agreed and Stoddard and Neel visited the area regularly during the spring and summer of 1951. They covered the sanctuary thoroughly as well as regions along the Apalachicola River. They searched quietly by canoe and on foot, and they split up regularly to increase coverage. Neel thought he heard an Ivory-bill while Stoddard logged one possible sighting. However, Stoddard could not accept either record as definitive. The pair was, however, treated with the rare sighting of a Bachman's Warbler on March 31, 1951, a species that is now thought to be extinct.

Stoddard also surveyed the area from an airplane and was impressed with the habitat he saw. He purchased aerial maps and used these as a starting point for examining new areas along the Apalachicola. However, none of the searches yielded positive sightings, nor evidence that the birds used the area on a frequent basis, and the sanctuary soon closed. Stoddard was convinced that Ivory-bills had been present. He suspected that the birds relied more



heavily on forests along the Apalachicola and only visited the sanctuary from time to time.

A Trio of Final Encounters

Herbert Stoddard chased Ivory-bills reports relentlessly throughout his professional career, but, as of the late 1940s, he still had not seen an Ivory-billed Woodpecker since his youth. As he told a colleague, “I knew the bird well before 1900 in the Fort Christmas area of Florida, but have not had a good look at one in fifty years. Have followed up on many reports in this section, especially soon after I got here in 1924, but they all proved to be duds.”

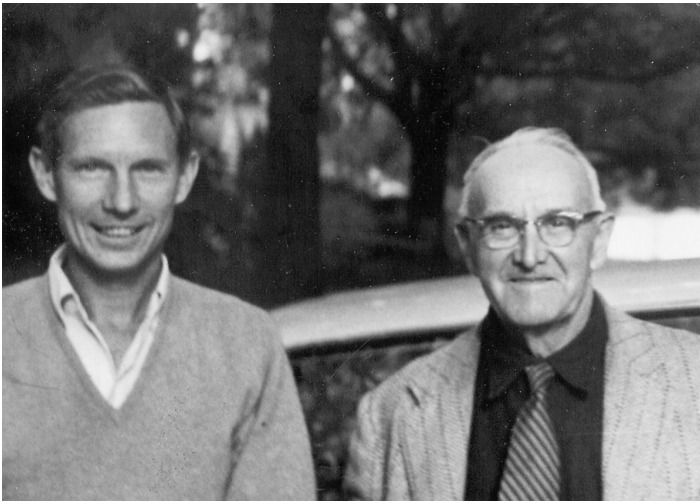
Stoddard finally recorded three Ivory-bills in the early 1950s—all in Georgia. The first encounter occurred in 1951, when he spied two female Ivory-billed Woodpeckers along Ward’s Creek just south of Thomasville. Two years later, he observed a lone Ivory-bill from an airplane

passing over the Altamaha River, close to Mount Pleasant. The tell-tale line of black separating white borders serving to distinguish the bird from the Pileated Woodpecker. Ironically, these sightings were chance encounters that took place when he was not out in the field specifically looking for the birds.

Stoddard never published these sightings nor mentioned them to some of his closest colleagues, but Leon Neel was working closely with Stoddard at the time and provided some of the missing details.

“He saw two females over in Ward’s Creek swamp on the Greenwood property known as Mitchell-Swift place,” Neel noted. “I was not with him that day. He went into that swamp, and there was a pine island that had spruce pine on it, big sawtimber-sized spruce pine.”

“Somehow a bug kill had gotten started in there, and most of the trees were dead. Mr. Stoddard went to mark



Leon Neel and Herbert Stoddard. Tall Timbers Archives

that bug kill to salvage the timber. Regrettably, he had sent me somewhere else that day.”

“I got home late in the afternoon, and he immediately came over and told me he had seen two Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. He was marking in that bug kill, which covered a couple of acres, and he heard them coming. They came in and lit on a couple of trees, and he thought that they were going to feed on the bug kill, but they stayed around just a little bit and then took off to the north.”

Stoddard and Neel spent a good part of the next year in that swamp with fingers crossed for another glimpse. They went before daylight, hoping to hear birds when they came out of a roost hole. They often stayed until dark, but they never saw another sign of them.

“He swore me to secrecy,” Neel says. “He would not tell a soul, because he said, ‘if I tell anybody, that swamp’s

going to be overrun with bird watchers looking for the ivorybill, and they will destroy it.”

Stoddard did write up personal field notes for the sighting along the Altamaha River on June 5, 1953. The archival notes say the plane had been flying above the clouds, but, in an effort to avoid a storm, the pilot took an alternate route which took the plane below the clouds.

Just as they passed over the Altamaha River Swamp, Stoddard writes that “I was all eyes as I saw we were over the River Swamp and the hardwood forest seemed a fine one and very wide.”

“While looking directly down on the tree tops, I was for a moment struck speechless by the sight of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker taking off from the top of a huge dead hardwood because of the low flying plane. For a fraction of a moment I had a perfect view of the wholly white lower back area of the bird as it flew above the dark foliage not 300 feet below. Before I could call my companions attention to the bird, we were past and the bird in the foliage... The bird was seen on the north side of the river, and fully a half mile from it not far from the middle of the swamp.”

A few years later, Stoddard received a letter from a young man who wanted to search for Ivory-bills. The man wrote that he had: “heard of an amateur ornithologist from Georgia who claimed to have seen Ivory-bills from an airplane, three years in a row; but he apparently would not tell no one of their whereabouts.”

Stoddard “got a good belly laugh” from the letter and replied, “To show how very badly things are distorted, or exaggerated in passing from person to person, [I] will cite one instance. I know very well the ornithologist you refer to that is supposed to have ‘claimed to have seen three Ivory-bills from an aero plane, three years in a row’. Also this man is ‘supposed to be an amateur with a good reputation’ when as a matter of fact he is a professional of over fifty years experience as such, and he saw only *one* bird on *one* occasion under very unusual circumstances. But he made the mistake of telling *one* good friend in *strictest confidence* of the fact. He knows the Ivory-bill as well as friend Peterson knows a Robin, and I know he is sorry to have mislead anybody if such is the case.”

Epilogue

Stoddard is well known throughout the Red Hills region for his stellar work on gamebird management, fire ecology, and forest management. While these all were



Authors (l-r) Fredrik Bryntesson, and William "Chuck" Hunter at the County Record Office in Blountstown, FL doing research on sightings of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Photo by Robert Turner



Wacissa River, Jefferson County, Florida. Photo by Fredrik Bryntesson

important locally, he was also one of the most influential ornithologists working in North America during the 20th century and a pioneering conservationist. He played on a much larger stage than most of us realize, and his accomplishments came without stepping into a formal classroom after he completed the eighth grade. Stoddard grew up in an era when care and conservation of natural resources were rare to nonexistent and wildlife management meant little more than establishing bag limits and seasons for harvest. The importance of habitat would not emerge until half way through his career, and in this darkness many species became extinct. Stoddard always held out hope and devoted much of his time gathering information that—in the right hands—could help to avert the losses. He also worked to conserve habitat, especially old-growth forests, throughout the southeast and obviously had grave concerns about a world with diminished diversity. It's an astounding legacy that seems to be as little known at times as his searching for Ivory Williams.

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