

Editorial - Creating Habitat for Rare Creatures

A couple of recent news releases really buoyed my spirits. The first concerned the recent sightings of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) in Arkansas. The ivory-bill is our largest native woodpecker and, until recently, was thought to be extinct. What is especially disturbing is that we watched them go. The disappearance of the ivory-bill was caused by logging of old growth bottomland forests in the southeastern United States, as well as poaching by professional collectors. The last population of ivory bills were hanging-on in a bottomland hardwood forest in northeastern Louisiana. As this forest was logged, one lone female was last seen in 1944 - that's over 60 years ago. Then, in February of last year, an unusually large, red-crested woodpecker was spotted in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, and this sighting was subsequently confirmed by experienced observers. After an initial flurry of interest, the news media dropped the story, and unfortunately, this remarkable event was compared to bigfoot sightings on the TV talk shows

The second story was about the Mount Diablo buckwheat (*Eriogonum truncatum*) that was recently discovered in a California park after being considered extinct for more than 6 decades. Fortunately, this sighting is much easier to confirm because plants, unlike animals, tend to stay in one place. The dozen or so buckwheat plants were found on a property preserved by the conservation group Save Mount Diablo. Seth Adams, director of land programs for the group, echoed my feeling that we've been given another chance: "These stories resonate with people because they show we can set back the clock and do it right".

Both these discoveries are evidence of Nature's resiliency, and emphasize the basic ecological tenet that habitat is crucial to the preservation of all organisms. They are also further ethical justification for ecological restoration. The habitat of the ivory-billed woodpecker is swamp and bottomland hardwood forest, most of which has been logged or drained for agriculture. Fortunately, the Cache River Refuge contains substantial old growth forest and tree planting on both public and private lands is restoring more bottomland hardwoods. These efforts to increase the amount and biodiversity of mature bottomland forest may just be enough to provide Ivory-billed Woodpeckers with suitable habitat. After all, they have proven their mettle and deserve a place to hide. In the case of the Mount Diablo buckwheat, protection will prevent extinction for the time being. However, there is also the opportunity to carefully propagate this plant and re-establish it in other suitable areas.

The role of native plant nurseries in helping preserve and restore threatened and endangered plants and animals is not widely appreciated - possibly because nursery propagation is seen as artificial rather than natural. Succession is inevitable, however, and the lack of widespread disturbance means that protection alone cannot save many critical habitats. Nurseries can produce native plants to recreate any successional sere and provide suitable habitat indefinitely. Hopefully, government agencies and private conservation groups will realize that forest and native plant nurseries are an essential partner in the effort to save and restore rare plants and animals.

References

<http://nature.org/ivorybill/>

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