

# PRESS BOOK

"It's a stunner"  
NPR

"Spellbinding...a cosmic lament for the forest primeval  
and man's search for environmental redemption"  
NEW YORK MAGAZINE

"Will fascinate practically everybody"  
NEW YORK TIMES

# Ghost Bird

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A DOCUMENTARY BY SCOTT CROCKER



# CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR

The New York Times

"Crocker has turned a bird-watching tale into a multilayered story that will fascinate practically everybody in *Ghost Bird*, a **witty, wistful** documentary."

NEW YORK  
MAGAZINE

"Critics' Pick! This **spellbinding** documentary takes a small item from recent history...and turns it into a cosmic lament for the forest primeval and man's search for environmental redemption."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

"By turns **witty and metaphysical**, *Ghost Bird* evokes the offbeat Americana of Errol Morris's "*Vernon, Florida*," while examining the nature of belief and the blurry margins of fact."

n p r

"Beautifully crafted...heartbreaking, ironic and infuriating. **It's a stunner.**"

IFC

Where all the cool movies go.

"*Ghost Bird* is a rare beast indeed — a matter-of-fact documentary about a seemingly innocuous subject that manages to become **profoundly moving.**"

ARTFORUM

"*Ghost Bird* considers the ways in which collegial debate, **intellectual rigor**, and a collective desire for objective truth are in danger of extinction."

MACLEANS.CA

"By turns **comic, mesmerizing and deeply poignant**, this investigative documentary is reminiscent of the work of Errol Morris in the way it casts a spell while telling a story and building a case."

TimeOut  
New York

"Thanks to Scott Crocker's crisply edited balance of scientific backbiting, naturalist noodling and a macro-philosophizing...what could have been a niche-specific doc becomes something **oddly compelling.**"

Boxoffice

"Crocker...has fashioned an eco-doc that acknowledges the complexity of conservation issues without diluting its own activist stance...**Ghost Bird has teeth.**"



## In Arkansas, They Brake for the Woodpeckers



Small Change Productions

David Luneau, a birder who has been involved in the search for the supposedly extinct ivory-billed woodpecker.

By [NEIL GENZLINGER](#)  
Published: April 28, 2010

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Generally speaking, bird-watching is a pastime that is extremely interesting to a few people and not at all interesting to anyone else. But **Scott Crocker has turned a bird-watching tale into a multilayered story that will fascinate practically everybody in "Ghost Bird," a witty, wistful documentary** about the supposed rediscovery in Arkansas of the ivory-billed woodpecker, a bird thought to have been extinct for decades.

The film, showing as part of a weeklong series called For the Birds at Anthology Film Archives (Hitchcock fans: Friday's your night), focuses on Brinkley, Ark., a tiny town in the eastern part of the state that went woodpecker crazy after one of the birds was or wasn't seen there in 2004. An inconclusive bit of video helped start the mania, and the scruffy town did its best to capitalize, with a woodpecker gift shop, a woodpecker hamburger and so on; a barber shop even offered a woodpecker haircut.

Mr. Crocker, showing a terrific sense of pacing, lets the excitement that enveloped the town sink in just long enough, then turns to the subsequent debate over whether the video actually showed an ivory-bill. By the time he's done, you may be pretty thoroughly convinced that there was no miraculous resurrection, and you'll also know why that's important: the continuing search for proof that the bird is back has siphoned money from efforts to save species that are definitely still with us and endangered.

But there's nothing dry about the debates between experts as presented by Mr. Crocker: he throws in goofy cameos by Woody Woodpecker and Donald H. Rumsfeld. But in the film's lighter segments he's never laughing at the people of Brinkley. He's more interested in letting their unpretentious good humor shine through. One area resident, shown while getting a haircut (though not the woodpecker one), mentions Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster.

"I've never known of one fatality caused by either one of them," he says, "but this woodpecker, it's going to kill some folks probably if they keep stopping on these highways taking pictures."

**GHOST BIRD** *Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.*

Produced, directed and edited by Scott Crocker; director of photography, Damir Frkovic; music by Zoë Keating; released by Small Change Productions. At the Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue, at Second Street, East Village. Running time: 1 hour 25 mins.

This film is not rated.

## Birds and Bergman: Movies Houses Span the Globe



By STEVE DOLLAR

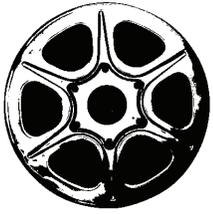
*Anthology Film Archives*

32 Second Ave. (212) 505-5181

For the Birds

Through May 5

The wing's the thing, in more ways than one, at "For the Birds." This inventive survey of avian-themed cinema, which began Wednesday, shuffles documentaries, vintage avant-garde shorts, and Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds," exposing feathered obsessions from multiple perspectives. The series's highlight is the New York premiere of Scott Crocker's "Ghost Bird," which unravels an ornithological mystery: the alleged discovery of an ivory-billed woodpecker believed extinct for 50 years in a swamp near Brinkley, Ark., in 2004. This resurrection of the "Lord God Bird," which was an inspiration for the cartoon "Woody Woodpecker," became a national phenomenon and a boon to Arkansas tourism. But closer investigations revealed it to be a myth. By turns witty and metaphysical, "Ghost Bird" evokes the offbeat Americana of Errol Morris's "Vernon, Florida," while examining the nature of belief and the blurry margins of fact.



# NEW YORK ENTERTAINMENT



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## Ghost Bird

✓ Critics' Pick

### Review

This spellbinding documentary takes a small item from recent history — the alleged discovery of the extinct ivory-billed woodpecker near a small, depressed Arkansas town in 2005, and the media and scientific hoopla that ensued—and turns it into a cosmic lament for the forest primeval and man's search for environmental redemption.

Anthology Film Archives celebrates the arrival of spring with *For the Birds*, a tribute to movies featuring wings and feathers, running from April 28 through May 5. Also includes screenings of bird-related shorts; Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud, and Michel Debats's *Winged Migration*; and, of course, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

## The hottest docs in Hot Docs

**BRIAN D. JOHNSON UNSCREENED** - Senior Entertainment Writer

Thursday, April 30, 2009 0:05

At the risk of sounding Toronto-centric, there's no question this city now serves as a movie mecca like no other. Not only is TIFF the world's most significant film festival next to Cannes, Hot Docs has become North America's number-one documentary destination. Tonight the 16th annual edition of Hot Docs kicks off with two strong features by Toronto filmmakers: *Act of God* and *Inside Hana's Suitcase*. I haven't seen all the 171 films playing in Hot Docs, not even close. But I've had a few sneak previews. Some outstanding highlights. . .



A tray of bygone ivory-billed woodpeckers in 'Ghost Bird'

### **Ghost Bird**

By turns comic, mesmerizing and deeply poignant, this investigative documentary is reminiscent of the work of Errol Morris in the way it casts a spell while telling a story and building a case. Directed by American filmmaker Scott Crocker, it unravels the mystery of the ivory-billed woodpecker, a magnificent bird that was thought to have been extinct for more than 60 years—until reports of

sightings began to emerge from the bayous of Eastern Arkansas. As the sightings are questioned, the filmmakers unearth an incredible intrigue involving a scientific and political cover-up. The ivory-billed woodpecker becomes a talisman for a sad tableau of planetary extinction, set against the backdrop of a depressed Arkansas backwater where residents are hoping an influx of bird-seeking tourists might raise their fortunes. And as if the story weren't strong enough, Crocker's camera makes rhapsodic forays into the bayou, letting the watery forest come alive as a character in its own right.

Also noted:

*Tyson* - James Toback

*Act of God* - Jennifer Baichal

*Burma VJ* - Anders Hogsbro Ostergaard

*Fig Trees* - John Greyson

*Winnebago Man* - Ben Steinbauer

*Inside Hanah's Suitcase* - Larry Weinstein

# Bird Watching

04.27.10

# ARTFORUM



Scott Crocker, *Ghost Bird*, 2009, color video, 85 minutes. Production stills.

BACK IN 2005, a couple of birdwatchers kayaking through the swamps of rural Brinkley, Arkansas, managed to capture on their digital video camera the fluttering white wings of a distant woodpecker. After reviewing the images, the amateur ornithologists claimed it was the first confirmed sighting in sixty years of the once-extinct ivory-billed woodpecker. American birders—and there are more than fifty million of them — were stunned.

News outlets quickly seized on the story, as did scholars at *Science*, who published a detailed analysis of the footage and concluded that, yes, the ivory-billed was still alive. Tourism in Brinkley skyrocketed, followed by everything from ivory-billed museums to woodpecker-themed hotels. The US government, after also verifying the footage, shifted millions of dollars from other bird conservation programs to fund a revival of the ivory-billed habitat. Bird experts headed south to spend a couple weeks out in the swamp. Here, some prominent birders quickly became skeptics: They found little evidence of woodpecker presence, and became convinced that the area was not remote enough to explain the six decades of silence. It was these skeptical scientists who returned to the original footage and, after seeing far more white on the bird's wings than black, agreed that this was not an ivory-billed but a pileated woodpecker. Publicly questioning the conclusions of both *Science* and the federal government, these dissenters became the pariahs of the mainstream birding community.

In his film on the subject, *Ghost Bird*, director Scott Crocker proves shrewd in his slow reveal of the hysteria that descends on Brinkley in the months after the ivory-billed discovery. Beginning in the magical silence of the swamp, he unveils a network of crass commercialization. For the Brinkley Chamber of Commerce, there's a hefty price tag attached to this rare bird. Crocker also lines the film with statistics about other endangered birds, implying that conservation funds are being siphoned away from species in need. **But if *Ghost Bird* begins as a portrait of a quirky wildlife debate, it ultimately concludes that truth itself is under attack in Brinkley.** After the *Science* article is published, Cornell University and the feds announce their verdict on the amateur video, and all scholarly debate grinds to a screeching halt. And when a handful of renowned academics attempt to present contrary evidence, they are not only ignored but shunned.

Far more haunting than the images of profiteering are the larger implications that truth itself has become subjective. To illustrate his point, Crocker abruptly pauses the narrative to turn to well-worn archival footage of former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld as he plays a calculated rhetorical game of "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns" with the press, deflecting blame for military complications during the Iraq war. Apart from an endangered bird and an equally endangered town, ***Ghost Bird* considers the ways in which collegial debate, intellectual rigor, and a collective desire for objective truth are in danger of extinction.**

*Ghost Bird* opens April 28 at Anthology Film Archives in New York.

— S. James Snyder

*Ghost Bird, For the Birds,*  
Other Avian Flicks at Anthology

On neurotic birders and avian beauty  
By Nicolas Rapold

Cinema has been for the birds from the get-go: It was the puzzle of winged flight that drove Frenchie Étienne-Jules Marey to build a pioneering 12-frame-per-second camera he called a "photographic gun" (imagine a tommy-gun with film instead of a clip). This week, stoked by a programming birder on staff, Anthology lets loose a flock of avian features and shorts alongside a premiere of Scott Crocker's *Ghost Bird*, a documentary about the search for the elusive (or illusory) ivory-billed woodpecker. The program's feathered friends reveal a bird's cinematic as well as paradoxical attractions—at once a vividly present pocket of life and fleeting blip on the landscape, intimately observed and physically remote, free and wild but compulsively tracked.



Ivy league: Ivory-billed woodpeckers at Harvard

Backed by an eclectic soundtrack, Crocker's 2009 doc traces the hubbub around the decades-departed ivory-billed woodpecker, purportedly rediscovered near Brinkley, Arkansas. **It's the sort of film that builds up familiar frenzy—newspaper notoriety, tourism uptick, government attention—only to dissolve in a what-just-happened daze.** The mania starts when one enthusiast captures a glimpse of the thought-to-be-extinct bird with an endlessly looping canoe-mounted camera, from which it's a hop, skip, and a jump to a besotted Interior official shifting millions in grants. (Rounding out the Bush-era boondoggle feel is a playful clip of Rumsfeld's swaggering WMD syllogisms.) Well-grounded hunters and soft-spoken obsessives like guide guru David Sibley swap skeptical reactions, as Crocker plays a kind of visual three-card-monte with bird images, culminating in the mesmerizing multiplicity of crowded drawerfuls of hyperreal stuffed birds at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology.

Although the story made the media rounds back in 2005 (recycled sources include a hairdresser, Chamber of Commerce rep, and an Argus editor), Crocker's folksy head-scratching gets at the hope behind the hunt. Or, in the words of one observer, "You can never prove it doesn't exist."

Details

*Ghost Bird*

April 28 through May 4

*For the Birds*

April 28 through May 5

Anthology Film Archives

Indie film news, reviews, commentary, interviews, podcasts and more, updated throughout the week.

## Ghost Bird

Scott Crocker's "Ghost Bird" is a rare beast indeed -- a matter-of-fact documentary about a seemingly innocuous subject that manages to become profoundly moving as it charges along. Some will take exception to the word "innocuous," for in the ornithological world, the supposed 2005 discovery near a small, depressed Arkansas town of the infamous Ivory-billed Woodpecker, a North American bird that went extinct during the 20th century, was a major event.



Indeed, for a couple of seasons, the town of Brinkley became ground zero for the bird-watching world, hosting acres of journalists, scientists, and tourists, all hoping for a glimpse of the rare and beautiful bird. And the down-on-its-luck community took full advantage of it – the local barbershop even started to give out "Ivory-billed haircuts," which they admit were no different than any other kind of haircut. After years of layoffs and boarded-up storefronts, business was suddenly booming.

Crocker creates a healthy dose of suspense, so I'll try not to give too much of the story away. "Ghost Bird" opens with beautifully shot images of the dense Arkansas woods where the sightings occurred, and it is this vision of the forest primeval that lends the story such pathos. The desperate attempts to discover the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, to find it alive again after all these years, gradually take on the qualities of a redemptive quest; it was under our watch, after all, that the bird went extinct.



It's an irrational belief, of course, this comical notion that our criminal destruction of the environment might be mitigated if we can find one damned woodpecker after all these years -- the film's litany of all the other species that have gone extinct over that time is heartbreaking. Within this absurd need lie deep, disturbing truths about the human condition and on the state of the world. That's not to say this is a grim work, by any means. On the contrary, "Ghost Bird" is a fleet-footed, almost playful documentary. But think hard enough about it and you'll find yourself overcome with grief.

Bilge Ebiri is our guest critic for the month of April.

*"Harry Brown" opens in limited release on April 30th; Anton Chekhov's "The Duel" and "Ghost Bird" are now open in New York.*

**FESTIVAL REPORT**  
**Cinema by the Bay Preview**  
By Michael Fox | Oct 22, 2009

*"Beautifully crafted... Ghost Bird is, by turns, wry, heartbreaking, ironic and infuriating. It's a stunner."*

It seems unlikely that someone could live for any length of time in the Bay Area and not be aware of the depth and breadth of the local filmmaking community... Documentary makers are in the forefront year after year with a slew of national broadcasts and awards, while experimental filmmakers carry on a 60-year-old tradition of personal expression and urban subversion... The San Francisco Film Society's first ever Cinema By the Bay series salutes each of these disciplines, honoring the mission and model of the fondly remembered Film Arts Festival.

The unqualified gem of Cinema By the Bay is Scott Crocker's Ghost Bird a doc set aloft by the announcement that the supposedly extinct ivory-billed woodpecker has been sighted in a corner of East Arkansas. Hope leads to hype and a new tourist economy for nearby Brinkley, but is everyone deluding themselves -- not only about the prospects for financial recovery in small-town America, but that we'll ever stop wiping out species. Beautifully crafted... Ghost Bird is, by turns, wry, heartbreaking, ironic and infuriating. It's a stunner.



## Ghost Bird



by Joseph Jon Lanthier

April 26, 2010

An enthusiast's documentary nearly as rare as its very possibly extinct subject, *Ghost Bird* uses testimony, history, and dialect-driven landscape to successfully infect us with the same awe-saturated curiosity that inspires the film's impassioned talking heads. As a summary of recent alleged rediscoveries of the ivory-billed woodpecker, and their investigative rebuttals, the movie has a redundantly cyclical structure; we bounce back and forth between confident cries of "We found it!" and subsequent returns to "Oh...I guess we didn't" sobriety...The sweet spot *Ghost Bird* nails with gusto, however, is the individual casually intrigued by biology but content to appreciate its surface aesthetics; the undeniable attraction of the woodpecker is the documentary's worthy focus.

And it is, truly, a numinous animal, with a proud black-and-white wingspan, intimidating ebony talons, and a bone-like beak suggestive of assiduousness; it's so breathtaking, in fact, that it earned the nickname "Lord God bird" after observers' tendency to blurt out ecclesiastical interjections. Even more remarkable, director Scott Crocker manages to impress us with the woodpecker's mythos and anatomy despite a dearth of photographic representation; a few black-and-white stills exist from the early 1900s, but all that remains from after the bird's disappearance in the '40s are emphatic testimonies from naturalist Arkansas locals. Crocker might linger a bit too long on the latter (his lengthy examination of the recent sightings' impact on the small town of Brinkley and its newfound tourist economy crescendos embarrassingly with a collection of country bumpkinisms), but discussions with the widow of ivory-billed expert James T. Tanner, and a curator at Harvard's ornithology department, home to dozens of taxidermically preserved *campephilus principalis*, provide more than enough apologia for the bird's rich cult following.

The politics of the search for the woodpecker, led by a team from Cornell University, are far less rewardingly recounted, though their exclusion would have robbed the documentary of its only dramatic arc. As with most scientific studies, the cut-throat competition for further funding is a primary influence, and at one point in the film a group of biologists withdraw a skeptical publication on the ivory-billed woodpecker's discovery for fear of having conservation agreements concerning the Cache River area reversed. Still, Crocker organizes this information to insinuate a daring ecological message: At a crucial juncture, the race to locate the woodpecker is interrupted by an ornithologist who perfunctorily but convincingly suggests that man's desire to study the species led to dubiously unsustainable examination practices that may have catalyzed its endangerment. **While the inconclusive nature of *Ghost Bird* is powerfully tantalizing, we respectfully agree with the film's implied thesis: Knowing definitively that the ivory-billed woodpecker still lives is less important than knowing that it is, or once was, a thing of beauty.**

**Director(s): Scott Crocker    Runtime: 85 min.    Rating: NR    Year: 2009**



Enthusiasts call the ivory-billed woodpecker "the Lord God Bird."

This magnificent bird, which inspired the Woody Woodpecker cartoon character, is also the Holy Grail for birders searching out rare species in North America.

But you may need religious-like faith just to believe it still exists.

That is the conundrum presented in **an excellent new documentary by American filmmaker and anthropologist Scott Crocker.**

"It was the kind of film that I wanted to make," Crocker tells Sun Media, "because I am attracted to ambiguity and complexity and I kind of wanted to make a reverse mystery: A story that started with answers and ended with questions."

Ghost Bird made its world premiere last night at Toronto's Hot Docs film festival. A repeat performance is scheduled for Friday at 1:30 p.m. in the Eaton Theatre at the Royal Ontario Museum.

The ivory-billed woodpecker is newsworthy because it was "re-discovered" in 2004.

While kayaking, Arkansas outdoorsman Gene Sparling thought he saw one of the elusive birds hitching around a tree in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in his home state.

Tim Gallagher of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and Bobby Harrison of Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, followed up on Sparling's convincing report. On their own outing, they claimed they saw an ivory-billed woodpecker, too, in Cache River.

In 2005, with much hoopla, after more expeditions and research, Cornell announced that the ivory-billed woodpecker was no longer extinct. The political machine cranked up. Eventually, the U.S. government announced \$27 million in appropriations for further research and search efforts, which continue today, expanding from Arkansas to Florida and South Carolina.

But Ghost Bird documents the growing skepticism over the initial announcement that, like Lazarus, the ivory-billed woodpecker has returned.

The last authenticated sighting was in 1944, when wildlife artist Don Eckelberry sketched and then painted an ivory-billed woodpecker he saw in Louisiana.

**Crocker approaches the topic on a grander scale than just documenting if the ivory-billed is extinct or alive, although that is important. Instead, the film uses the vociferous debate as a platform to address larger issues, such as the ethical responsibility humans have towards other living creatures.**

"I am not a birder," Crocker says. "My background is in anthropology. So I came at this story more from a cultural standpoint than from a nature-wildlife or birding standpoint."

The initial reports of the return from extinction captivated him, as it did millions, when the story crossed over into the mainstream in 2005, Crocker says.

"The ingredients of it were so fantastic and amazing: An extinct bird species is re-discovered. It is the largest woodpecker in North America. It is an iconic mega-fauna bird. That is hard not to be captivated by. I believe the native Americans used the bills of these birds in their pipes, so it was as if they breathed the soul of the bird in with each inhalation. It is a totemic bird."

But the deeper he plunged into the story, the more complex and disturbing it became. Crocker's film addresses the controversial video naturalist David Laneau filmed of a supposed ivory-billed in flight (doubters claim it is a pileated woodpecker, a common cousin of the ivory-billed).

He extensively interviews artist-ornithologist David Sibley, who leads the doubters in refuting Cornell's evidence (the Cornell team refused to cooperate with Crocker, continuing their practice of damage and information control).

Sibley also addresses the thorny issue of how government funds are being siphoned away from other nature projects to devote to what may be Cornell's futile ivory-bill projects.

Crocker says the story of this red-crested beauty is now a cautionary tale. "The bird really becomes a mirror for us for so many things, not the least of which is our own culpability in the loss of other species."



**GHOST BIRD** (Scott Crocker, U.S.). 85 minutes.  
Wednesday (May 6), 9:45 pm, Cumberland 2; May 8, 1:30  
pm, ROM.

**NOW RATING N N N**

# Ghost Bird

*“often thrilling...”*

**RADHEYAN SIMONPILLAI**

The often thrilling birdwatcher doc Ghost Bird comprehensively covers the media hoopla and subsequent conspiracy surrounding the sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker, which was presumed extinct for almost a century.

Brinkley, a depressed Arkansas town, takes sudden economic flight after governing bodies prematurely confirm evidence of the bird’s return. But it all comes crashing down when the industry built around the myth is challenged by expert opinion.

Director Scott Crocker insightfully tallies up the economic, environmental and social ramifications of the event on both conservation efforts and Brinkley, while drawing apt parallels to Bush’s war on terror.



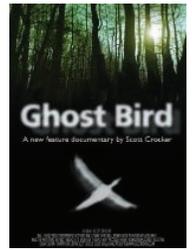
## Ghost Bird ●●●●○

Dir. Scott Crocker

Styles: documentary

Others: Boneshop of the Heart, The Understudy

### HIGHLIGHTS



Benjamin Franklin famously suggested that the turkey, not the Bald Eagle, should have been chosen to represent the United States. In a letter to his daughter, he wrote, the eagle "is a bird of bad moral character." Too lazy to do real work itself, it steals prey from the nests of other raptors. Too cowardly to fight, it can be scared off by attacks from birds little larger than sparrows. The turkey, on the other hand, would defend its home even against fully-armed British soldiers.

While his praise seems facetious, anyone who's watched a turkey in the wild may agree with his commendation: turkeys are careful, surprisingly clever, and intimidating birds for their size. And somehow, they now rival or surpass the Bald Eagle as the foremost bird in the American consciousness. I'd imagine, though, that things would have turned out much differently if Franklin had ever caught a glimpse of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, a bird so impressive that even 60 years after the last confirmed sighting, it still holds a massive amount of cultural and emotional significance for many Americans.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker, one of the world's largest woodpeckers, has a yard-long wingspan, a thick beak three inches in length, and claws for miles. This formidable physique is wrapped in the kind of curves and colors that make it seem like an Art Deco approximation of the archetype of woodpecker: a slim and curving neck, a prominent crest, white racing stripes, and piercing bright eyes. It's not hard to understand why birders, hunters, and naturalists still keep hoping to catch sight of one. But this woodpecker is significant for more than simply being possibly the most stunning bird in the United States. As director Scott Crocker's documentary *Ghost Bird* skillfully demonstrates, the so-called Lord God Bird embodies the paradoxes of Americans' relationship with their rapidly-transforming natural landscape.

*Ghost Bird* revolves around the recent sighting of the bird near the town of Brinkley, Arkansas. Despite being unverified, the sighting spawned a flurry of activity: high-profile searches, expensive electronic monitoring equipment, premature declarations of rediscovery by the Department of the Interior, and an economic transformation in Brinkley as it responded to all the attention with souvenir shops and hospitality services. Despite the largest and most costly lost species recovery effort in history, the search results remain inconclusive.

This story, in itself, is exciting enough. The race to rediscover the species takes a surprisingly twisting route, involving missteps, false hopes, and even academic cover-ups. And it's genuinely affecting to see some of the country's top birders nearly choke with emotion describing their hopes and disappointments.

But Crocker gives us even more than that. The Ivory-billed Woodpecker's story intersects several distinct and formative phases in the development of America's environmental consciousness, and this cultural history is effortlessly woven into the present-day search for the bird. Both the unrestrained hunting and especially collecting that characterized the early naturalist movement, a precursor to environmentalism that established the first national parks, contributed greatly to the species' decline. By 1938, it was believed that only 20 birds remained, a third of which lived in old growth forests in Louisiana to which a Chicago company held lumber rights. Despite public and governmental pressure, absent any laws protecting endangered species, the company cut down every tree in the forest, an action that helped form the environmental movement.

Much, of course, has changed since the last verified sighting of the bird. The Endangered Species Act protects other species from similar fates, at least in theory. And a host of environmental regulations now exist that would have been unthinkable in the 1930s. In part, these developments can be attributed to the disappearance of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. But still, its habitat is now smaller than ever, and many other birds that actually still do exist are set to meet similar fates.

The now-ghostly Ivory-billed Woodpecker might symbolize our relationship with nature better now than ever before.

- Benjamin Pearson



Opening on the boggy marshland of Arkansas, candid voice-overs from the locals of the small town of Brinkley entice us toward the notion that the Ivory Billed Woodpecker, long since thought extinct by all experts, is alive and well and that by all accounts from the locals, near enough everyone has a friend or at least a friend of a friend who has seen one! So begins Ghost Bird a humble project from director Scott Crocker that investigates the very much Fortean phenomena surrounding the recent sightings of the woodpecker and the effects, both good and bad, that these anecdotal reports have had on the local community, conservation and economy.

Taking very much an objective standpoint (a refreshing thing indeed considering subjective narrative documentary is still very much in vogue), Crocker sets the scene of a town that seems to be on the verge of an economic boom. Traders of all types are taking advantage of the recent press regarding the emergence of the woodpecker, with hairdressers advertising Ivory Billed haircuts while the local diner has added Ivory Billed Woodpecker burgers (made from chicken before you ask) to its menu. And it's all thanks to the smallest of glimpses on video of what John Fitzpatrick (Director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology) adamantly states to be genuine proof of the Ivory Billed's existence.

Yes indeed, souvenir shops, guided bird watching parties and twitchers from across the world; it would seem from the beginning that Ghost Bird was a story of defiance not just in the face of extinction but also with regard to the recent recession that hit the U.S and European economy. Like the Ivory Billed Woodpecker, small towns like Brinkley can rise up from the marsh land, jubilant and invigorated...if only it were so simple.

Sadly but necessarily, Crocker does not take this utopia on face value, rather he does what any self respecting documentarian and/ or scientist would do and delves deeper into the evidence at hand. Enter the voices of scepticism, some of the strongest belonging to Nancy Tanner and David Sibley. Tanner's late husband, Jim, a renowned ornithologist, studied the Ivory Billed Woodpecker in its natural habitat for the best part of his academic career, watching as its home became more and more depleted through the ever driving market of agriculture. For such a large bird to still exist in such a small environment is dubious at best for Nancy, likewise too for Sibley (author & illustrator of the Sibley Guide to Birds series) whose ramblings around the Arkansas hotspots found them to be smaller than anticipated while being densely populated with hunters and fishermen (for a bird with a thirty inch wingspan to be seen rarely in this space would be unusual in itself). More damning is when Sibley pretty much identifies the video footage, certified as concrete evidence by the optimists, as nothing more than a Pileated Woodpecker; a similar but smaller and still very much alive species.

Thus the drama is set, with Cornell academia and Brinkley locals defending the sightings as genuine while the outcast and outgunned sceptics continued to highlight flaws within the collated evidence. It would be tempting, from a romantic point of view, to fall foul of the same blind hopefulness as the believers in Ghost Bird, and the film is careful not to shine the townsfolk in a negative light for their faith but when the film begins disclosing that the hunt for the Ivory Billed Woodpecker is assimilating millions from other conservation funds that help keep existing species alive your viewpoint quickly becomes somewhat jarred and the utopia of Brinkley and its resurrected mascot may be coming at a high cost. This and the fact that Nancy Tanner has never been invited to give her opinion of the footage as well as the clandestine attitude of Cornell toward releasing its findings, makes for a quagmire of suspicion and scepticism as murky as the haunting marshlands themselves.

Shot on a minimal budget, Ghost Bird is an intriguing examination on both a cryptozoological level and a sociological one, the iconic status of an extinct bird holding so much sway over a town and its identity is as much the lynchpin of the narrative as the investigation itself.

Equally observant, analytical and thorough as it is **sombre, haunting and emotive, Ghost Bird is multi faceted in its importance as both a message of hope for the future of small town America and a wake up call for conservation so that the fate of the Ivory Billed Woodpecker does not end up being the fate of so many other species.**

- Michael Byrne

## Ghost Bird

Directed by Scott Crocker

By Robert Bell

In 2005, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology announced that the long-extinct Ivory-Billed Woodpecker had been discovered in the swamps of eastern Arkansas, sparking excitement and hope from bird enthusiasts and researchers alike. Denizens of the nearby community of Brinkley embraced the idea with enthusiasm, driven by the potential rejuvenation of their deteriorating, Wal-Mart-dominated economy from the anticipated influx of tourists. The media joined the cause as well, preaching the miracle of a resurfaced species despite the fact that the only evidence was a blurry video.

Eventually, those removed from the event began to take a closer look at the facts, discovering that in all likelihood, the videotape showed a Pileated Woodpecker, whose colourings are similar to that of the extinct bird. Subsequently, funds utilized for preserving living birds in danger of going extinct were expended on trying to prove the existence of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker, thus reinforcing the human cycle of wilful ignorance, rather than the acceptance of unflattering realities and responsibility.

There is an overwhelming sadness throughout *Ghost Bird* that echoes the very core human anxieties of annihilation and meaninglessness, along with blind hope as a means of coping with the undeniable but often ignored reality that everything ends. People would much rather believe in an unlikely miracle than acknowledge their place as a destructive species whose fleeting existence ultimately means very little. Sadly, this denial creates only a cyclic pattern of destruction, as blind ignorance may help with pesky feelings of doubt but does little to help humanity progress and learn from its mistakes.

The documentary is smart and insightful, expertly interweaving interviews and archive footage in a way that never stops short of being captivating. Appropriate parallels are drawn between dying species and communities, while everyone involved turn a blind eye, seeking only immediate gratification.

It's sharp criticism, not only of our current environmental crisis but also of a culture so afraid of feeling sad that realities are ignored and progress is stunted.