

## Back From the Brink

It had been sixty years since the last documented sighting of an ivory-billed woodpecker. As a practical matter, the bird was generally considered extinct. Then a small but impassioned effort was begun to find the last ivory-billed. Now, out of the sprawling cypress and tupelo swamps of eastern Arkansas known as the Big Woods, word of success has emerged.

Is there a moral to be found in this odyssey? Some would say that all is well with the world, while others would say that the fabric of nature is dangerously frayed. Both are likely correct, while the truth is somewhere in between.

The ivory-billed woodpecker as a chance to survive, albeit marginally, because it could retreat into the deep, dark recesses of a largely undisturbed natural environment. Nationally, there are fewer and fewer such places. Locally, the challenge is to retain enough of the environment to sustain nature and the quality of place.

The Triangle region is both blessed and cursed with one of the highest growth rates in the country. Local government professionals and elected decision makers are constantly juggling economic development and conservation. The spatial pattern that results will determine both, the viability of ecological systems function and the potential quality of life for the community's residents. This is where the evolving regional greenway network has a primary role to play.

The very large, intact natural environments required to give the ivory-billed a second chance no longer exists in this region. The question here is whether migratory songbirds, frogs, salamanders, crawfish, otters, etc. will be able to survive in the urbanizing area. If not, their loss will ripple through the ecosystem as a food web disturbance that weakens other bird, animal, and fish populations. In turn, this reduces the livability of the area for those persons who reside there.

A regional greenway network comprised of a continuous, interconnected, and integrated system of local greenway corridors is an ecologically advantageous spatial pattern. Corridors of sufficient width will serve as habitat and travel routes between larger natural areas, and both characteristics are critical for maintenance of ecological functions. The conserved wetlands and floodplains within riparian greenway corridors are absolutely necessary for species diversity and health in urbanizing areas. These forested corridors also buffer surface water quality, mitigate air quality, and sustain aquatic food chains. As a bonus, the corridors can accommodate public trails for recreational exercise and nonmotorized transportation. The corridors potential for informal and formal environmental education/enjoyment adds to their quality of life benefits.

It would be excessive to claim that greenways will stop the extinction of any species. Nevertheless, they can reduce the number of species that approach the brink in this region. With the support of greenway users and advocates, the TGC will move the creation of local greenway systems and a regional network along sooner rather than later; or too late.