

Audubon

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COULD THE IVORY-BILL
STILL BE ALIVE—IN CUBA?

NEW! HOW-TO SECTIONS ON
BIRDING, TRAVEL, PHOTOGRAPHY

SAVED BY AN OWL: FROM
DRUG DEALER TO FALCONER



DISPATCH

**DELUSION
IS THE
THING
WITH
FEATHERS.
ALSO,
HARDSHIP
AND
MISERY...
AND HOPE**

**A Cuban adventure
in extreme birding
on the trail of a species
that almost certainly
no longer exists.**

BY MAC McCLELLAND
Photography by Greg Kahn



WING AND A PRAYER

Tim Gallagher (left) and Martjan Lammertink on their Ivory-bill quest. Some believe that if the phantom bird still exists, it would most likely be here, in the rugged mountains of eastern Cuba.

“Here ends our happiness,” the driver says, approaching the end of the pavement and stopping the government truck. It has no seatbelts or roll bar, and apparently very little in the way of shocks, but the two birders on board *are* happy, now and these past six days, despite how the particulars of their expedition may have struck others—say, the writer and photographer also on board—as uncomfortable. Or, frankly, miserable. Tim Gallagher, 65, and Martjan Lammertink, 44, went through worse in their searches for *Campephilus* woodpeckers in other countries before they landed in Cuba to look for the granddaddy of all finds, the elusive and by most accounts extinct Ivory-bill. No one has looked hard here for a long time, in this last half-plausible place. *Someone should really look in Cuba*, people who know and care about such things have been saying, and so here Gallagher and Lammertink are. With, as it happens, not much they aren’t willing to do—suffer; die—to get that done.

There was the crush of last-minute getting-ready, Gallagher typing up loose ends as editor-in-chief of *Living Bird* at his office in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. There was Lammertink on a 22-hour bus to a Brazilian airport from interior Argentina, where the Dutch ornithologist works for the National Scientific and Technical Research Council, followed by 19 hours of airports and planes to Ithaca, New York. There were the two of them at Walmart together buying pots and pans and tents and staying up late packing and waking up early to drive, along with the writer, more than four hours to Toronto and then landing late in Holguín, east Cuba, Gallagher more than two personal airline bottles of prosecco deep, to deal with the even later arrival of the photographer. No sooner had they had breakfast at their budget homestay the next morning, after four hours of sleep for Lammertink and maybe five for Gallagher, than maps were spread open across a table and Carlos Peña, a Cuban natural history specialist, stopped by to help strategize. *This is where the paved road ends*. Pointing, leaning. *This is where any road ends. This is where you might be able to pick up some mules to help with transport*. Then it was out to a grocery store for rice and pasta and eggs and water before a quick lunch and into the car for the first leg of the long trip, to Farallones de Moa. Toward the mountains. Into the woods.

The rented car was a 1955 Willys: two and half seats in the front and two very narrow

benches bolted longways into the back. The group’s hundreds of pounds of gear, food, and luggage were piled up in between and on top of half of them, leaving Gallagher and the photographer to squeeze onto the ends of opposite little pews, hunching over to keep their heads off the low metal roof. At breakfast the writer again expressed her wish that there were seatbelts, which she generally tries to secure on work trips when she is in charge of logistics; while the photographer kindly validated her feelings by saying this was a normal human desire, Lammertink did not deign to respond. Gallagher, maybe a bit tipsily, had slapped her knee and laughed about it the night before as their young driver sped the proto-jeep away from the airport around the proliferation of horse-drawn carts on the street in the dark. Now, as they prepared to drive the first three of the many, many hours they’d spend on Cuban roads over two weeks, Lammertink invited the writer to cram herself into the only place she would fit, between him and the driver. “It’ll just be much more fatal in an accident,” he said of sitting in the front, then laughed, the fact that car accidents cause the most American deaths abroad being funny.

This wasn’t a “hard” trip. A hard trip, that would be something like Mexico, where in 2010 Gallagher and Lammertink, in quest of Imperials, a possibly also extinct and even larger—the largest—woodpecker species, were headed into cartel lands so dangerous that every one of the Mexican biologists who had been recruited to go with them dropped out.

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Ha ha!

But of course, this is *birding*. Go dangerous or go home.

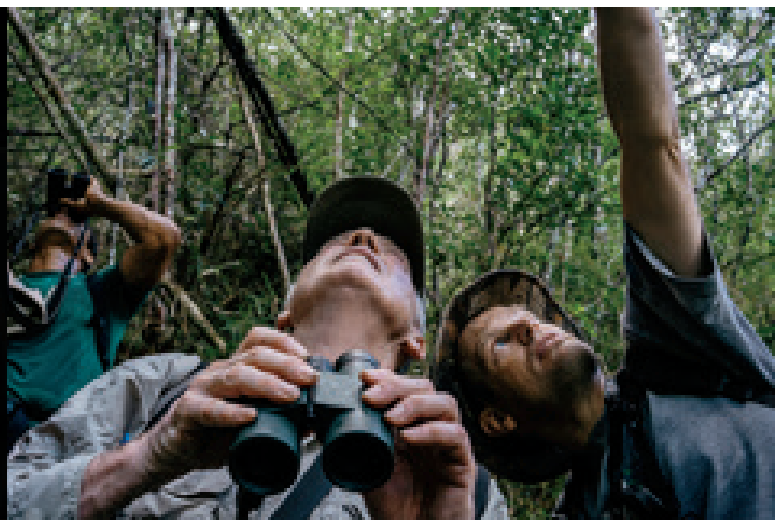
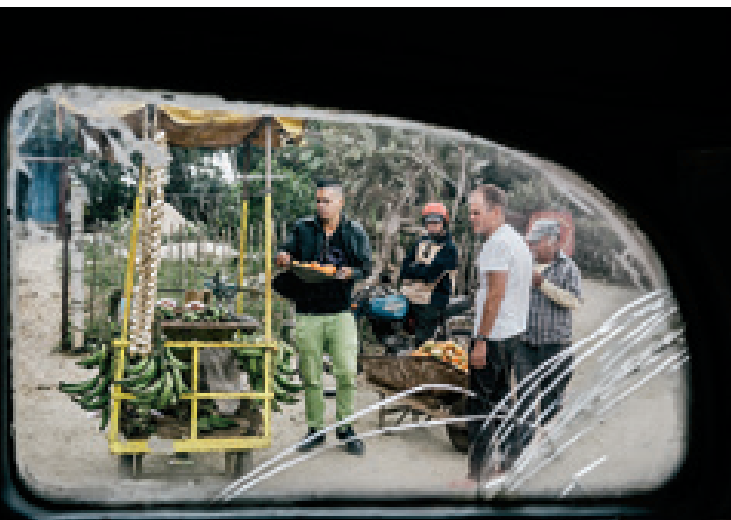
The target destination was Ojito de Agua, an area beyond Farallones in the mountains of Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt. In 1986, Cuban biologists Giraldo Alayón and Alberto Estrada found Ivory-bills there, and a few weeks later they and the eminent woodpecker specialists Lester Short and Jennifer Horne confirmed the sightings there. Lammertink himself spent eight months in 1991 and 1993 looking for them there. Ojito de Agua has been protected for 30 years now—since the sightings—so maybe, Lammertink hopes, the habitat might now be more hospitable to Ivory-bills.

In the car to Farallones, Gallagher bounced his old bones about in the back with zero complaints and inhuman patience. Dust swirled in through the open and broken windows, more as they got farther from the city, five miles an hour and less when the pavement expired and the road turned uphill and rocky and



ON THE ROAD

From left: Picking up supplies near Farallones; national park guide El Indio (background) and Gallagher and Lammertink search the treetops; using oxen to drag the jeep out of the mire; Gallagher updates his journal.





Last Call?

Cuba is the only place besides the southeastern U.S. that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers lived. Some hold out hope that a remnant population hangs on in the island's eastern mountains.

deeply, deeply rutted. He cheerfully schlepped in his Wellingtons through mud and across narrow planks over ravines to a jungle shack lent to them by a coffee farmer who never, ever buttons his shirt—then back out again after the regional Protected Areas official told the foreigners by phone that he wouldn't allow them into the forest from there. And that nor were they allowed in Farallones at all. As a tiny muddy village, it has no amenities or services for visitors, including—most importantly—permission to host them.

So it was on to Baracoa, a lovely if mildly shabby beach town four and a half hours of mostly jolting non-road farther east, to meet with the evicting regional Protected Areas official, whereupon he sent them back again some two hours west, to the national park's visitor's center on Bahía de Taco, a parking-lot-size patch of grass separating the non-road from the ocean where the group was to sleep for two nights in a different, more of-

ficial jungle shack while the Protected Areas agency considered whether to allow them to venture deep into the national park.

At Taco Bay, the sand flies were savage. There was no plumbing but a vat of carried-up river water from which the group could draw buckets to bathe beside the non-road. Everyone, even the birders, hated the bathroom, a multiperson outhouse that did not enjoy much in the way of maintenance. When the supply of potable water they'd hauled in ran out, the writer taught herself how to use the \$250 worth of water-filtration and UV-sterilization equipment she had bought before embarking (she and the photographer, who are accustomed to hardships but of a different kind, have discovered that they are wearing matching new pairs of technical wicking antimicrobial quick-drying underpants). Gallagher helped her purify water for the group, impressed with how much more convenient it was than a camping straw, which filters bacteria one sip at a time and does not filter viruses and which was all he carried

MAP BY MIKE REAGAN



in his bag, though he has neither a naiveté about waterborne illness nor an ironclad digestive tract. A partial list of places where Gallagher has suffered severe gastrointestinal distress includes: Mexico, Costa Rica, and Peru. In Mexico, he also got Hepatitis A. Which is a virus.

But this wasn't a "hard" trip. A hard trip, that would be something like—speaking of—Mexico, where in 2010 Gallagher and Lammertink, in quest of Imperials, a possibly also extinct and even larger—the largest—woodpecker species, were headed into cartel lands so dangerous that every one of the Mexican biologists who had been recruited to go with them dropped out. Gallagher and Lammertink went anyway, and in one of the villages on the way, three houses were burned to the ground, one man kidnapped for ransom; as they drove through the area, they passed locals fleeing the other way. But they pressed on, crossing paths with armed traffickers and enlisting smugglers and Uzi-carrying locals as guides, Gallagher praying that if he got killed his wife would find his notes and finish the book he was working on, and when they emerged from those mountains alive, the

Lammertink averages 40 botfly cases per year. In the shower on the first morning here in Cuba, he squeezed a mass of yellow pus and partly liquefied dead-botfly parts out of a hole in his forearm.

finally secure the coveted clearance into Ojito de Agua. They have left the rented Willys and loaded more provisions into this government jeep driven by this government employee, though after a too-brief stint at the mechanic's it is barely or in the opinion of at least one national park staffer not at all ready to complete the trip up the half-road on the mountain ahead. In even the best scenario, it is unlikely that the group will reach their destination,

get worse. By the time they do, the team has driven back east again to Baracoa, and then south through the mountains and switchbacks to the ocean clear on the other side of the island and west again from there, the views gorgeous with beach to the left and dramatic desert rock to the right on the way to Guantánamo, to another Protected Areas office to beg, barter, and

a manned national park station seven miles up deep mud and rock, before dark; twilight approaches, and the forecast calls for rain, which will render the way unpassable by jeep for sure.

The government driver tries anyway. He takes a deep breath and gathers himself when the pavement ends, and they crash forward through the uneven landscape, jeep rocking violently and Gallagher and the media trying to keep from slamming into one another in the backseat. Until they stop. Stuck. Mired in a deep mud trench. Everyone

ejects, and rocks are collected and thrown under the tires and into the muck ahead, and after a while the truck is dislodged. And then more crashing—and some very near tipping—and then they get stuck again. And the driver kills the battery trying to drive out. And everyone again decamps, and the gear and luggage and provisions are offloaded, splayed around the muddy clearing, and the driver runs away, and after a long time he returns leading two yoked oxen from a farm somewhere and they're tied to the truck and everybody pushes and rocks it while the farmer beats the oxen relentlessly, breaking branches and then entire small trees over their backs and across their faces until they break free and escape and don't trample anybody but have to be chased down and wrangled and re-tied to the truck.

After a couple of hours of this, Gallagher turns to the writer and remarks, "This gives you a little idea of how hard it is to study these birds. And why nobody's doin' it."

It grows dark.

It starts to pour.

Really, she has no idea.

In photographs, the Ivory-bill has something human about it. There's a sentience to the weirdly alert yellow eyes, an intensity to its regard that, combined with a wide stance—rare in the bird world—reads almost like standoffishness. In pictures from 1938 of a large juvenile perched on naturalist J.J. Kuhn's arm in Louisiana's Singer Tract, the bird's big,



forest ranger who had—under great protest—helped them get in broke down crying.

Or, a hard trip would be something like Argentina, where Gallagher and Lammertink trekked high and low and high and higher and low and high again following radio-tagged Helmeted Woodpeckers (a species that indisputably exists) over the jungle hills starting at 4 a.m. daily and for 14 hours a day while it poured relentlessly and mosquitos infected with botfly eggs bit them and dropped maggot larvae onto their bodies, where they burrowed and grew and thrived. Lammertink said nothing about the pain, but Gallagher caught him flinching once as one crunched away at the shoulder tissue under his skin. (Gallagher himself finally reached a breaking point and dug his infestation, and his skin and thigh tissue, out wholesale with a knife.) Living in Argentina and tramping often into the jungles after Helmeted Woodpeckers, Lammertink averages 40 botfly cases per year. In the shower on the first morning here in Cuba, he squeezed a mass of yellow pus and partly liquefied dead-botfly parts out of a hole in his forearm.

Cuba is nothing. They don't even have botflies in Cuba!

Still, the driver of the government truck is right. Things do



UPHILL CLIMB

Lammertink and Gallagher head out for another day of fruitless interviews (opposite). Above:

The double-knock box they use to simulate the BAM-bam the Ivory-bill would make on a pine; Lammertink's camouflaged audio feedback device plays bird calls.



slightly opened beak looks a breath away from expressing fully formed sentences.

In stuffed specimen form, the Ivory-bill looks like a raggedy nightmare. Dead-eyed or eyeless and old, the ones in the Cornell Ornithology Lab's vault were only depressing to behold when Gallagher and Lammertink brought them out past multiple security doors for the writer to inspect before heading to Cuba. One specimen there, mounted on a piece of wood, was previously a decoration out on someone's smoking porch or something, the feathers weathered and broken down. In the collections manager's office, another mounted specimen has its serrated tongue intact and extending between open bills, but when the thing was gingerly lifted up for the writer's closer review, one long toe-claw fell off.

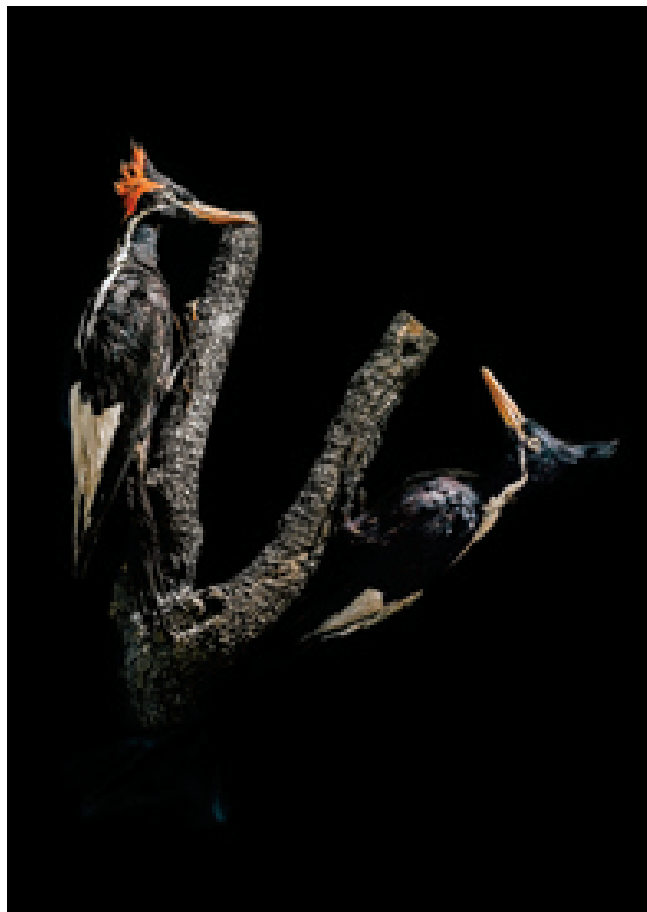
No wonder Gallagher was so thrilled to see a live one tear through the sky in the Arkansas bottomland swamp in 2004. He had been obsessed with birds for as long as he could remember, once in his early teens lying facedown on the ground in the sun of the California mountains for hours looking dead so a Turkey Vulture would land on him. (By the time the experiment was reluctantly abandoned as a failure, he was so burned and dehydrated that he barely had the strength to ride his bike back down the hill and home.) And then there he was, after so much searching, rediscovering the bird world's most coveted and iconic

ghost species. Or so he, and several other searchers whom the Lab of Ornithology subsequently enlisted to scour swamp forests across the South for five years, spending several million dollars, maintain—though



SKIN AND FEATHERS

A pair of 100-year-old-plus Ivory-bill specimens at the Felipe Poey Natural History Museum at the University of Havana.



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named in the paper the Lab eventually published. He still believes his colleagues, but he thinks the bird or birds they saw have probably since died. He is highly skeptical that any Ivory-bills still survive in Cuba, the only other place besides the Southeast United States they've ever been known to live: The title of the paper he published after searching here in the '90s is "Status of Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis* in Cuba: almost certainly extinct." He wrote another piece for the journal of the Neotropical Bird Club called "No more hope for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis*." But maybe, he thinks now, the birds weren't there then, in the few remaining patches of pine forest where American researcher George Lamb *definitely* saw (and obtained photographic proof of) them in 1956, the last such universally accepted records on Earth. Maybe they found suitable habitat in the lowland hardwoods nearby, where maybe they held on until the newly protected pine forest regenerated enough for them to return.

On that note: The national park guide assigned to the group at Bahía de Taco, who goes by El Indio, said he saw an Ivory-bill with his father just 24 years ago, right in those lowland hardwoods, where the birds would generally not be expected to live.

And so the group looked there, in the lowland hardwoods. From Bahía de Taco they set out on what Gallagher invariably calls a "death march": 12 hours and, according to the photographer's iPhone, 99 flights of stairs' worth of elevation over often extraordinarily slippery red clay scouring for Ivory-bill markings or oval nest cavities in trees. It was on that day that they first broke out the double-knocker.

The double-knocker is an innovation of Lammertink's own design and construction. An online video documents him using it to attract another *Campephilus* woodpecker, the Pale-billed, which exists from Mexico to Panama, strapping the small wooden box to a tree with rope, pulling out a contraption made of two dowel rods that he sways back then swings into the box, one dowel and then the other making contact, mimicking the distinctive *Campephilus* sound: *BAM-bam*. In the video, recorded in Costa Rica, he does this, and then, from a distance: A Pale-billed knocks back.

!

In the forest near Bahía de Taco, Lammertink trudged off the path beaten for park visitors and through the brush up an incline, finding a pine tree in a growth of quebrachas, the type of tree El Indio said were dominant where he had his sighting not far from there. Everyone stood silently as Lammertink prepared. He pulled out the box. He strapped it up. He set the dowel contraption on top of it. He opened his notebook. He marked down the time and GPS coordinates. He pulled out an MP3 player attached to a speaker wrapped in camouflage. And then, after much such settling in, he swayed back, and struck.

BAM-bam.

the only video they captured is highly contested as proof.

As a teenager, Lammertink, too, tried to attract the close attention of a vulture, attempting first to buy a dead sheep but ultimately resorting to sprinkling a doll in tomato-sauce blood and leaving it under the raptors' flight path. (This experiment also failed.) He was one of Cornell's Ivory-bill searchers 10 years ago, but not a beholder of one of the six other sightings

Everyone was silent.
Lammertink looked around slowly.
He waited 22 to 23 seconds, checking his watch, then struck again.
BAM-bam.
He waited.
He struck again.
And again.

After 10 double-knocks, he put the dowels down, picking up his MP3 player and speaker. He scrolled through his playlist, then pressed play, holding the speaker aloft as the recording of an Ivory-bill, the only existing recording of an Ivory-bill, from 1935, played, underlain by heavy static. People say it sounds like a horn. Or a baby goat. *Kent. Kent-kent.* Lammertink turned in slow circles blasting it, and Gallagher kept his ears alert as the sound played for 90 seconds. Then he turned it off, and waited.

He put his hands on his hips. He checked his watch.
Gallagher didn't move.
Then they started the process over, in the same spot.

BAM-bam.

A double-knock session takes about 30 minutes. With other *Campephilus* species, Lammertink has waited as long as 20 minutes afterward for them to respond to a call. When he thought they'd waited long enough this time, the group all sitting and standing silently there in the forest, they picked up the bags and waters and cameras they'd set down and took off again, hiking 500 meters farther into the forest to try again. The call carries at least half that far, so to maximize exposure in the limited amount of time available to any one man, Lammertink spaces them out thusly. After the second session, they hiked another 500 meters, and tried again.

Those 30 minutes, knocking and waiting the third time, it was getting late in the day. It was hot, and mosquitos landed on the motionless party. At some point, the photographer wandered off a bit. Gallagher sat down farther back on the path and rested. The writer practiced her yogic Mountain Pose. A huge bird suddenly broke through the trees and soared into view, sweeping and grand and even with some white underside. But it was only a Turkey Vulture, buzzing close to remind them that life is fleeting.

There have been times when Lammertink used the double-knocker in places where he knew for a fact *Campephilus* woodpeckers were nearby (-slash-existed), and they didn't respond. To get one to do so on this trip in a territory this large, he conceded to the photographer, would be very lucky. To not get one proves nothing.

So: There is not a moment to waste. Not in Bahía de Taco double-knocking, and especially not after Lammertink walked to El Indio's father's house and interviewed him and asked him what sound the Ivory-bill had made when he saw the bird with his son 24 years ago and the man made the wroooong, *very* wrong sound of a different bird, and the wrong wing description to boot. As El Indio was only seven at the time, his recollection likely colored by his father's identification of the species, both of the accounts of these two—the only two—witnesses to the exciting possibility that the Ivory-bill did or could live in non-pine forest in eastern Cuba were therefore called into question.

It was a disappointing development, one that Lammertink would henceforth refer to as "The Twist."

So not a moment to waste getting out of Bahía de Taco—though the forest there was chockful of other species sightings: Scaly-naped Pigeon and Cuban Trogon and Stygian Owl; Cuban Amazon, Cuban Pewee, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Tody, Cuban Solitaire, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Black-



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Clockwise from top left: Jabao Zahares, longtime friend of Martjan Lammertink; Jesus Ymbert Planas runs the forest station at Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt; Rubiel Guerrero Rodriguez has seen an Ivory-bill but not since the 1970s; Rafael Osorio says he saw Ivory-bills in the 1950s.

and-white Warbler, Cuban Green Woodpecker. Not a moment to waste getting to Guantánamo and getting permission—no time to care or alert the authorities about the endangered parrot being kept illegally caged on the floor of the kitchen in the restaurant where they ate in town—and getting back out to push up the mountain, not a moment to wait for a new day with more

light remaining and less chance of rain or a fully fixed vehicle that might not die when it gets stuck.

That night, after hours of human pushing and oxen pulling, the jeep is freed. And with more pushing and pulling, it is rolled backward, and pop-started. But it cannot make it up the now rain-slicked mountain rock, though the driver tries for a terrifying 20 minutes with all the equipment and group again loaded inside. There is a Cuban military outpost a ways back down; the group makes their way there in the downpour, in the dark, and begs a patch of concrete floor to sleep on in a dwelling containing what Gallagher will refer to for the rest of the trip and maybe the rest of his life as The Worst Toilet in the World.

"This will be a great story to tell later," he keeps saying. He's been saying this for six days. He will continue to say it for eight more. But the writer is in no mood to agree with the principle that a good story is better than a good time, partly because she has become afflicted with diarrhea—the group has concluded that

there must have been an accidental ingestion of a drop from the Bahía de Taco vat of river water—but also because people (read: men) who constantly tell stories of bad times are tedious, and she is basically certain she could write an equally compelling scene if this Cuban restricted-jungle military outpost in the mountains above Guantánamo had turned out to be home to a team of scrappy dogs attired in miniature formalwear and trained to serve cocktails to visitors—which would be a good time—rather than a toilet that in addition to being The Worst has no door to separate anyone who’s using it from her comrades.

Earlier, the photographer sidled next to the writer and asked, as they both turned their faces away from the merciless beating of the oxen, a patch of protected Cuban forest being deforested with the tearing down of ever-larger branches and trees with which to assault them, “Do you ever wonder if this is all worth it? For a bird?” The two of them snickered darkly. Just moments before, a chunk of wood had cracked off an oxen-beating club as it broke over the animal’s hide and shot past the photographer’s head, missing him by maybe an inch. “One that almost definitely doesn’t exist?”

“There is definitely a subset of people who are driven to this,” famed birder and Pulitzer finalist Scott Weidensaul will later explain to the writer. There are birders (and other field biologists), he will say, who are driven to the extent of, “Let’s save 45 minutes of field time tomorrow by finishing this hike tonight in the dark, even though we may fall and break our necks.” He has himself made “really bad decisions,” he says, for which he could have died. Even in the absence of bad decisions, outcomes can be fatal. Ted Parker, another famed birder, did die, along with premier neotropical botanist Alwyn Gentry and leading Ecuadoran conservationist Eduardo Aspiazú Estrada, in a plane crash doing a treetop survey; so did Phoebe Snetsinger, then the most prolific birder in history, when her van rolled in Madagascar. Nathaniel Gerhart died in 2007 in a car accident in Indonesia—three years after he discovered previously unknown habitat of the Selva Cacique—and so did Sjarhei Abramchuk in 2010, from an encephalitis-bearing tick bite in Belarus. Subramanian Bhupathy, head of conservation biology at the Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History in India, died in 2014 after slipping down a hill and landing with a bamboo spike in his eye.

“I’m not saying that that’s a decision I would necessarily make,” Weidensaul will say of the hypothetical dangerous night hike. Though “part of that just becomes if you’ve gotten away with it in the past, you assume you’re gonna get away with it in the future,” he’s taking fewer risks now. But “I certainly understand what drives somebody to make that kind of a decision. Just this driving passion to push yourself to the limit because you don’t know what’s on the other side of the next hill. Because you don’t know what you’re gonna find, and if at the end of the day you haven’t done everything you possibly can, you leave yourself

“I certainly understand what drives somebody to make that kind of a decision,” says Scott Weidensaul. “Just this driving passion to push yourself to the limit because you don’t know what’s on the other side of the next hill. Because you don’t know what you’re gonna find, and if at the end of the day you haven’t done everything you can, you leave yourself wondering: Well, what if I had?”

wondering: Well, what if I had?” Of Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt, Weidensaul says, “If there’s a reason there’s an Ivory-bill anywhere, it’s there, it’s because those are the places that are most difficult to get into.”

When the group wakes up at dawn in the military outpost below Ojito de Agua, Lammertink secures four mules to carry gear. Two national park guards also arrive to accompany them. The sun comes out blazing. They climb uphill. When they make it to the manned station several miles up in the afternoon, they stop for a moment—but then continue on, five miles more to the clearing at Ojito de Agua, where Lammertink wants to make camp and mount searches. The writer, who has been ingesting food but has effectively not eaten in two days because of the diarrhea, becomes too weak to stand; they put her on a mule. They put Gallagher, who is growing increasingly tired, on another one. They reach Ojito de Agua shortly before dark, and it starts to rain as they set up their tents. The Cubans fill the designated treated-water receptacle with untreated water; Lammertink, the only fluent Spanish speaker, has not explained to them that the Americans are designating such a receptacle or why because he personally is not bothering with water treatment from this mountain spring. A partial list of untreated-water tragedies that have occurred in Lammertink’s previous fieldwork includes: the death of a human man. That time even Lammertink didn’t trust the water, so sketchy were the sources they were pulling it from in the Bornean jungle, but the field assistant, a local, wouldn’t listen to anyone’s warnings. Diphtheria came on fast after he went back home and turned worse quickly; by the time his family went for medical help, there was nothing anyone could do.

The photographer almost drinks the untreated water before the mistake is discovered.

The writer has already drunk a liter of it.

At Ojito de Agua, everyone in the small camp bathes and washes their hands and dishes in a stream that the mules are pissing and shitting in and near. The second night, one of the mules awakens the camp, moaning and thrashing and crashing around; it lies down, and then, to the great astonishment and helplessness of its Cuban masters, violently dies.

“This is not what normal birding is like,” Gallagher clarifies at some point to the writer, in case this has been lost on her.

It starts to pour again. In the morning, they break dead-mule camp for fear of infection and rotting-mule smell and hike three miles to another, smaller clearing, perched on the side of a cliff where mosquitos are swarming in great clouds. It rains again when they arrive to set up for three nights among the trees and underbrush, which in this area are covered with sharp thorns and spikes of varying lengths. When Lammertink stayed here 25 years ago, he brushed up against a plant that turned his forearm into a bloated, oozing, yellow-pus-seeping rash of open blisters that didn’t close for five months, and then didn’t fade from scarring for “years.” He doesn’t know which plant it was, so he can’t point it out.

But.

In between the moving, and machete-swinging through non-trails, and basic surviving:

Silence.

Between sweating and getting snagged and rained on, slipping over wet rocks in the middle or right on the side of a mountain, 20 flights of elevation before even 7:30 a.m. one day (the writer climbing under her own power, as her stool has miraculously solidified):

They stop. They strap up the double-knocker. They turn on



recorders, and write down coordinates, and call to the Ivory-bill. *BAM-bam.*

They wait, collectively, for hours, sitting or standing quietly, for a response. *BAM-bam.* Waiting. *Kent-kent* through the speakers; waiting. Hiking and trudging and starting over. In all that stillness and hard staring, it's easy to understand how an anticipation broken by a bird finally bursting forth would evoke sobs, as it immediately did in the guy Gallagher saw the Ivory-bill with in 2004—after they'd dodged countless close calls with poisonous water moccasins in the southeastern American swamp.

But in Cuba, one never does burst forth. Worse, there are not even any signs in this place, the last place in the country where Ivory-bills lived, that they were here anytime recently. There are no foraging signs, none of the bark-scaling and bark-stripping Ivory-bills do. No recent cavities. The forest is not even as Ivory-bill-friendly as Lammertink would like. Though protected, it's dense. The regrowth pines don't have enough light and space to grow into big Ivory-bill habitat. There are no reports among locals, not even crappy secondhand rumors that one has been seen or heard in decades, excepting *one* witness who they will go check out when they leave the woods. All of the interviews with potential witnesses they've tracked down so far have been hopeless: The one with El Indio's father that contained *The Twist*, the one with the former logger they passed on the way to the national park station who said no one had seen the bird after the '80s, the one with the 91-year-old in Farallones who said Ivory-bills were everywhere when he was a kid but not since, and kept trying to steer the conversation away from extinct birds ("He says, 'We're all made out of dust and to dust we will return,'" Lammertink translated. "His wife passed away three years ago, and he believes she now lives in eternity, or something") as Lammertink mightily steered it toward extinct



CALL AND (NO) RESPONSE
Lammertink tries to call in an Ivory-bill in the forest near Bahía de Taco.

birds again and again ("There's probably at this age more pressing questions than Ivory-bills," he said as he finally gave up).

Sitting down in camp on the final night, Lammertink pronounces that the worst day in the field is better than the best day in the office. He became captivated by woodpeckers in general and Ivory-bills in specific when he picked up a book on the bird family by chance in a library at age 11. When he graduated high school, he worked at a dairy factory to save money to finance his trip to come here and look for them, and this time, he is satisfied with how much ground he's covered. He is hungry, since he ate only a handful of stale crackers for lunch on another hard-charging day of traveling and double-knocking, and thirsty, since he lost his water bottle at some point in doing so. Having observed the character of his interactions with the other members of the group for almost two weeks, the writer has circled in her notes to ask him if he likes birds better than people, but on this last night she sits down next to him and asks instead if he cares more about birds than he does about himself.

He pauses for a long, long time, and stutters. He allows when pressed that the botflies are a gross and painful annoyance but a small one, and maybe he should put more DEET on his clothes. But when you're getting up close on a bird and you feel a mosquito land, you can't just be swatting around like a maniac. No. You can barely dare to breathe. He doesn't think he would kill himself over a bird. Not deliberately. Yes he's had dengue fever and malaria, and he died once. Well didn't quite die, but came close to dying, when he and a field assistant were swarmed by thousands of bees in Borneo. They were in and out of con-

Continued on page 59

sciousness after, ferocious puking and diarrhea while some villagers tried to pluck thousands of stingers from their faces and backs and arms, and others stood around saying they wouldn't make it for sure. It was an Oriental Honey-buzzard, which rips open bees' nests, that had whipped them up and caused the whole event; Lammertink had never seen one of the birds, and he was pretty excited until the bees attacked. He and the field assistant are married now and have two children. "I've been doing this now for, let's see, 25 years, fieldwork in tropical areas, and you know, I'm still alive," he says. He laughs. "So, why not do it for another 25 years?" He is not a thrill seeker. Not even a risk seeker, he says. He acknowledges that some of the work he does is risky, "but it's always for some kind of conservation project, and if something goes terribly wrong, at least in my last moments, I know it was for some greater cause."

In the morning, Lammertink, who can endure almost anything but cannot abide an unshaven face, shaves by feel beside the cold creek. The group packs up camp. They march eight miles over a mountain ridge and out of the forest, stopping for a last double-knock session, finally coming out the side opposite the one they entered—north, back up in Farallones. Both birders say, as they emerge filthy from the trees, that it does seem like the Ivory-bill is dead in Cuba. Lammertink's earlier conclusions, he re-concludes, are confirmed. The little bit of hope he was holding is squashed.

But.

Wait.

The Ivory-bill is not given up so easily.

After a night of sleep back at the first jungle shack, the birders decide, while the photographer and writer are out of earshot, that they will go back into the woods. Today. There is still that last witness, who someone said saw one in 2008 and heard one in 2011. They haven't interviewed him yet. They are on their way to interview him this morning. If he seems credible, they will ditch the writer and photographer and round up some mules and hike right back into the mountains for another double-knock session tonight, and another at dawn, and then try to race back out and to a driver and to the airport hours away over barely-roads to make their flight tomorrow.

There's hope! Gallagher thinks, perking up out of his dire exhaustion, in which he barely staggered out of the woods just yesterday. *We can still do this!*

The witness says he saw Ivory-bills, all right.

He saw them in 1971.

Gallagher is crushed. His throat is thick with grief and near-crying when he comes into the writer's hotel room the next day to confess the plan to jettison her and continue the expedition, foiled only by the confirmation of a faulty report. "I just suddenly . . ." he says. "I thought: These birds are really gone." His swallows are heavy. "I mean, I'm the most optimistic person in the world, and it was just . . . inescapable to me. And I almost felt guilty, as though, like, me giving up made it so. It was really like having a loved one on a ventilator or something, and they're already gone, and you just have to make that decision to give up."

He thinks other people should keep looking here. Even though he feels sure the birds aren't here. He doesn't know why. He says it's hard to say. He himself won't come back, though, unless there's a solid sighting. This is it for him.

Here in Cuba, anyway! He's talking about the *Cuban* Ivory-bill. He will continue to float the rivers and bayous of the American Southeast looking—Oh yes!, he says. Because that's who he is. He will never give up the dream of finding one in America, though he's been mired in controversy since the first time he proclaimed that he had—the catalyst of the highest-profile birder fight in modern history. Weidensaul, when saying on the record that he considers Gallagher's sighting "persuasive," equates that admission to "driving nails into the coffin of my professional reputation."

"I need to go, to exclude the possibility that they're there," Lammertink had said at the Toronto airport, before they left. "It's too important not to check."

"Of course, it's a real long shot, and probably nothing will happen," Gallagher had said the same day. "But as in fishing, if you don't put your fly in the water, there's no chance you're gonna catch anything. You could go to some stream and go, This is a terrible-looking stream, or whatever, or unlikely to have trout, but I'll cast the fly out there. And I've caught trout in some really unusual places." If he can keep that kind of hope up for trout, what can't he do for birds, with which he's been in love since he was talking to them out on his grandmother's porch as a three-year-old while his father, a sailor who was sunk three times in World War II and came back a scary drunk, knocked her around inside. "Someone's gotta do it, or it's not gonna get done."

The writer and the photographer don't

understand, haven't understood, the risks the birders take. But one could argue that the writer and photographer do—that they are on this very trip doing—the same for their own work. The birders' passion does bring maybe balance but certainly conservation successes sometimes to this planet. The sightings in the '80s got the forest they've just exited protected, and perhaps not a moment too soon—three of the areas where George Lamb photographed the Ivory-bills in the '50s are completely logged and mined out, in a country that is really just now opening up and increasing infrastructure and investment. Gallagher's alleged 2004 sighting helped get more of a singular and threatened American landscape preserved. It's hard to argue that it was a bad outcome, regardless of whether there were Ivory-bills in it. Back in the day, early explorers did outrageous things to discover the world when it was still wild and unknown. So do their modern counterparts, who are trying to prove it still is, and to keep little pieces of it that way.

On the way to Farallones, back on the first day, the group stopped by the side of the road for a bathroom break. Though it's currently the only road connecting all the cities in Cuba's northeast, they didn't bother to properly pull over. They climbed out, dusty and jeep-shook. Not a car passed. After they'd all returned from their visits to the surrounding woods, they stood stretching their legs quietly until Gallagher intoned, in his best voiceover impression as he gazed toward the trees, "And they stopped for a bathroom break, and suddenly, there was an Ivory-bill!," his face lit brighter than two bottles of prosecco at the possibility. **A**

Mac McClelland wrote "*Slip Sliding Away*," about climate change in North Carolina's Outer Banks, in the March-April 2015 issue of Audubon.

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