



Ghosts and tiny treasures

We are quick to condemn a hunter posing with his prey, but all too slow to cultivate a chronic passion for wild things

Bryan Pfeiffer

Ten years ago this spring, in the darkness before dawn, I switched on my headlamp, dialled in my compass, and set forth into a chilly Arkansas swamp. Dressed head to toe in camouflage and lugging an arsenal of camera gear, I wandered alone that day through lowlands of oak, cypress and sycamore, through muck and icy water, and through my own hopeful apparitions. After about 10 miles of this, in the golden hour

before sunset, I found a dry rise in the land, propped myself against a fallen tree, and waited for a resurrection.

At the end of my tree, an orange-crowned warbler, drab as those leafless woods, foraged for insects. A white-tailed deer, a buck with an eight-point rack, sauntered by, sniffed the evening breeze but failed to pick up my scent. The evening's first few mosquitoes found me. No matter. I would not give up this spot, my focal point until after sunset: a hole about four inches in diameter high on the trunk of a sycamore.

This had been my routine every day for the better part of two weeks. I walked miles through the swamp, searching the skies and the naked trees, and listening for a telltale double-knocking sound or a distinctive tin-horn '*kent-kent*' call – the sounds of a ghost. Along the way, I found wrens and butterflies, beaver skulls and turtle shells. I found time away from work and the glowing screens, time for daydreams, and for hope. And at the end of each day, I parked myself at a hole like this one so that I might, at long last, witness some sort of human redemption. On this final evening in the swamp, like every other, I waited for an ivory-billed woodpecker to return from the dead.

And on this day, like every other, the woodpecker never came.

After one of the most expensive and unsuccessful bird hunts ever, the ivory-billed woodpecker is almost certainly extinct

<<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1523-1739.2011.01715.x/abstract>>

and, when I was in Arkansas searching it, probably had been gone for decades. We logged and neglected this giant woodpecker into oblivion – not into the figurative oblivion of obscurity, but the literal oblivion of nothingness, a final flight from which there is no return.

It turns out that extinction is indeed forever. And in the time since a wing-flash of hope came from Arkansas, an apparition of this woodpecker in the swamp, we've learned so little about nature – and about human nature. With too many of us watching from the sidelines, extinction and ignorance march onward, including a kind of extinction in our own backyards.

It wasn't supposed to turn out this way. From Arkansas came news that caused birdwatchers everywhere to spit up their shade-grown coffee. Some of the most respected ornithologists and conservation organisations claimed to have discovered at least one ivory-billed woodpecker that had cheated extinction and was still living in those swamps. Their evidence was, in large part, a controversial, fuzzy 10-second video of a bird flying away. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology (CLO) and a battery of

ornithologists announced their find in the journal *Science* <<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/ivory/evidence/ScienceArticle05.pdf>> in 2005.

When CLO organised search teams to get better evidence – including a decent photo – I helped assemble a crew of field-tested birders from here in Vermont. From late February into March 2006, as part of the official search party in Arkansas, we became actors in what amounted to a human drama – with the swamp as the stage and the woodpecker as a yearning and a plot.

The script would have it that the woodpecker was our shot at redemption, that maybe we didn't screw up after all. Maybe we could feel the actual pain of extinction but then get a second chance to make things right. In this plot, in death and then in resurrection, the ivory-billed woodpecker would be a saviour to expose our fraught and fickle relationship with wildlife and wild places. A bird so compelling that it had been called the 'Lord God Bird' would be just that.

The plot thickened. After taking a hard look at all the evidence, ornithologists concluded that Cornell and its colleagues got it wrong, that the video showed not an ivory-billed woodpecker but a more common (and similar) pileated woodpecker. The skeptics published a rebuttal in *Science* <<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/311/5767/1555.1/F3>>.

I joined the search party in Arkansas as a heretic. I agreed that the original sighting was no good – or at least not good enough to make the claim that a bird long thought to be extinct was still flying among us. Yet I went nonetheless into the swamp, in part out of selfishness. At the very least, I'd spend late winter in the wild menagerie of a southern swamp. And that particular year, the Arkansas River valley and environs were dry enough so that rather than sitting in a canoe all day, I could walk in woods that would normally be flooded. Walking is good for the mind. And as I walked, day after day, mile after mile, my doubt about the woodpecker gave way to hope.

With each new step, I hoped I was wrong about the video. I daydreamed of encountering a pair of ivory-bills in their swamp. (I even imagined finding them copulating.) The skills I had accumulated during nearly half a century as a boy explorer, in so many woods in search of wild things, would pay off. I would be the *one birder* who got the prized photo. I would prove the resurrection. Vanity infiltrated my fantasy. I envisioned myself at a news conference, heroic, beside a giant version of my woodpecker photograph. Everyone would ask: 'What was it like to witness the Messiah?'

Or so went the script of my fantasy. Reason had me convinced the woodpecker was gone forever; hope (okay, and vanity) kept me walking in the swamp and looking up to the trees and toward the heavens.

The woodpecker never came, not for me, not for anyone. Cornell wrapped up its searching in Arkansas in 2008. It's been quiet ever since. And in the decade or more since our flirtation with redemption we continue on a determined path of ambivalence or neglect for wildlife. We plod onward with a wonderful yet fickle relationship with animals – loving them and forever killing them off. And knowing so little of what we're losing.

A dead lion with a name, a Minnesota dentist who pulled the trigger, and the rise of an internet lynch mob: is this how we take action and measure our victories?

Now, seated before the glowing screen, we whip and zoom with white-throated swifts along the course of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, we migrate with wildebeests across the Serengeti, we swim among coral and dolphins at the Great Barrier Reef. Never have we been so figuratively close to wildlife – and yet so far. Our gadgets and electronic maps read our exact location and desires virtually anytime and anywhere. Never before have we been so located – and yet so lost.

Despite the distractions, yes, we do care. That is genuine. We care about big woodpeckers and giant pandas. We care about whales and baby seals. We cared about Cecil the lion – but for all the wrong reasons. Maybe the gratuitous killing of one lion in Zimbabwe did the world – and the lions – some good. That's not yet clear to me. But is this what it takes? A dead lion with a name, a Minnesota dentist who pulled the trigger, and the rise of an internet lynch mob? Is this how we take action and measure our victories?

Take your pick from actual chronic or acute causes of extinction or extirpation: invasive plants, pesticides, climate change, our own population bomb. How hard we work to tell the world about those actual threats. But a guy shoots a lion, and we have a target for our online opprobrium – a target other than us. So instead of reasoned action to deal with genuine threats, the masses grab their torches and pitchforks (Twitter and Facebook) and storm 'the cloud' demanding blood as vengeance for Cecil. Maybe they get some. Maybe not. And then the masses go back to watching cat videos or a rat carrying pizza into the subway; we go back to warming the planet, drinking factory coffee, and spraying chemicals on our lawns.

Perhaps our indifference is born of ignorance, owing to a steady retreat from the wild. In our youth, in books, culture and experience, we used to be closer to whatever swims, slithers, crawls, walks, flies or just sits there on life's long, green path. We were kids catching frogs in ponds and running wild with butterfly nets. We went outside instead of online. We got dirty in the swamps.

I don't doubt a persistent human passion for wildlife. Nor do I doubt the distractions keeping us from nature. What we need instead is a more measured passion, a chronic passion, a broader caring for wildlife beyond the charismatic. Sure, we need the pandas and the whales as icons, for posters and fundraising, and for our hearts to beat faster. But so much more wild is out there vanishing or in trouble. We're losing it from under our noses.

A park might become a shopping mall. We lost Jimi Hendrix but not his music. These are losses – but they are not extinction

Consider the Poweshiek skipperling (*Oarisma poweshiek*). Most people don't. It has few Facebook friends or people crying out to 'Save the Skipperling'. Yet the skipperling is now one of the most rapidly declining animals in North America. In the decade since I visited the swamps of Arkansas, Poweshiek skipperlings appear to have blinked out from 96 per cent <http://www.fws.gov/policy/library/2014/2014-25190.pdf> of their prairie sites in a range stretching from Manitoba to Michigan. This elegant animal, dying out on our own continent, might be more imperiled than pandas or lions. And you've probably never heard of it. The Poweshiek skipperling is a butterfly.



The Poweshiek skipperling butterfly. *Photo by the author.*

As best I can tell, I've never witnessed extinction. Never have I known a plant or animal, only to see it vanish forever from Earth. The Poweshiek skipperling could become my first. Few of us know this kind of loss. It does not compare with the death of a friend or a family member. That is absolute and visceral loss. Nor is the loss of the skipperling quite like the closing of our favourite coffee joint. That is tolerable loss. A park might become a shopping mall. We lost Jimi Hendrix but not his music. These are losses – but they are not extinction.

To everyone now alive, the extinction of the ivory-billed woodpecker is an abstraction. None of us (except those who claim to have seen it) have witnessed the Lord God Bird and its flight into oblivion. So, yes, the loss of that woodpecker hurts – but not like losing something we know, something we've seen, something we love. I've met the Poweshiek skipperling in the prairie. If this species goes extinct, I will mourn it more than the extinction of the ivory-billed woodpecker. Once the skipperling heads to oblivion, I will have only the memory of spending the afternoon of 13 July 2003, in a prairie fen in Michigan, on my knees and on my belly with this tiny orange butterfly.

Even so, the Poweshiek skipperling is hardly charismatic megafauna. It flies not with the flash of a fritillary or the fame of a Monarch. Spend a day in the skipperling's prairie and you are more likely to watch wildflowers sway in the breeze or sense the curvature of Earth in an open space. Without the skipperling, the prairie will still be

the prairie. But it won't be the same prairie. At least not to me. Without the Poweshiek skipperling, the prairie will be eroded and incomplete.

Unlike the extinction of the famous, the skipperling represents the extinction of the modest. Like the *desaparecidos* of Latin America, these species vanish with only limited public awareness and few advocates working on their behalf. Included among the modest are countless, nameless other species going extinct before we even know they exist.

And yet now, here in the Anthropocene, during the era of the new human distraction, comes a third kind of extinction: our fading awareness of the near and the common. I see it far too often, particularly among birdwatchers (who tend to be myopic in their pursuit of animals) and others who should know better. Too many of us know not when the spotted salamanders migrate by night for their once-a-year-orgy; we ignore the first aroma of balsam poplar in May; we leave this earth having never tasted the sweet wintergreen joy of creeping snowberries. These common events are threatened with a passive, chronic extinction – an alienation from nature that the writer and lepidopterist Robert Michael Pyle in *The Thunder Tree* (1993) calls the 'extinction of experience <http://americaswildlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/The-Extinction-of-Experience.pdf>':

The extinction of experience is not just about losing the personal benefits of the natural high. It also implies a cycle of disaffection that can have disastrous consequences. As cities and metastasising suburbs forsake their natural diversity, and their citizens grow more removed from personal contact with nature, awareness and appreciation retreat. This breeds apathy toward environmental concerns and, inevitably, further degradation of the common habitat.

So it goes, on and on, the extinction of experience sucking the life from the land, the intimacy from our connections. This is how the passing of otherwise common species from our immediate vicinities can be as significant as the total loss of rarities. People who care conserve; people who don't know don't care. What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?

What is the extinction of the Poweshiek skipperling to a child who rarely goes outside to play? As it turns out, lots of butterflies resemble the Poweshiek skipperling. Anyone can walk out the door and never be far from another species of skipperling or from members of a huge group of similar butterflies called grass skippers. Find them in your local meadow or scrubby field in July, glowing in the grass like little orange

flames. My most recent skipper encounter came along the Rio Grande in Texas in January, where I photographed a Southern skipperling (*Copaeodes minima*), one of the smallest butterflies on the continent.

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Knowing the Southern skipperling – and the high skipper diversity around the world – might make it easier to shrug off the extinction of the Poweshiek skipperling from the prairie. What's another skipper when they all look alike? We hear a lot of this from people who don't care much for wildlife. But what about the rest of us? Might we be culpable to a similar form of this thinking? What about those of us who have never seen or understood our local skippers or other animals in our own backyards?

We can discover more. The great unknown at our feet is a remedy for the extinction of experience. Those actual encounters with the wild outside, no matter how near or how common, help us relate to the wild far away, no matter how remote or rare. When we know our local skipperling, when we see it dart and flutter in the summer fields, when it dances like a marionette above the wildflowers, when it alights with dignity to take nectar from a purple coneflower, we've kindled another flame for nature. When we know our local skipper, we might care more about the skippers on the distant prairie or other faraway places. The frogs in our pond can help us know and care for the frogs of the tropics. And extinction should be fungible. The impending loss of a prairie butterfly might help us recognise and better care for our butterflies close to home. The extinction of frogs in the tropics might cause us to care more about the frogs in our local pond.

Then extinction will become less of an abstraction and more universal. And extinction will hurt. We'll feel it in our blood and in our bones. Even when we only read about it. It'll hurt like when the bees are gone and crops fail, or when a shopping mall obliterates our favourite wetland. Extinction anywhere will create a longing in us, like the yearning for whatever we love. When we know more about the wild in front of us we will care more about the wild we're losing.

By the time I went to Arkansas a decade ago, we had offered too little, too late to the ivory-billed woodpecker. When I was searching for it, this woodpecker had probably been extinct since before I was born. I knew it on that final night while watching my

tree cavity in the swamp, waiting for a ghost to fly into its hole and roost there for the night. Even so, even as I waited in vain, as I knew extinction when I saw it, and even during my final retreat in the dark from the swamp that night, I clung to an irrational hope that the woodpecker still flew in these woods, and that before I left Arkansas I might still manage to see it, to somehow witness the resurrection.

Hope is a powerful thing. But the ivory-billed woodpecker was our false prophet. Reacting to a sighting that was most likely a false alarm, conservationists and the federal government had protected acres of bottomland swamp where the woodpecker supposedly still flew.

The rusty's status as 'just another blackbird' relegated it to an obscure path toward oblivion – an extinction of the modest

Almost every day in the swamp I noticed wintering flocks of rusty blackbirds marauding through the trees, fattening up on the fruits of a southern hackberry (*Celtis laevigata*). Basic black with an inelegant voice, this blackbird is hardly a celebrity. It nests in places we rarely visit – bogs, swamps, and other wetlands across Canada and just barely into the northeastern US. And it's in trouble.

For the past half century, the rusty blackbird has suffered one of the most dramatic population declines ever noted among North American songbirds. As bald eagles and peregrine falcons recovered, rusty blackbird numbers were plunging by an estimated 90 per cent

https://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/nwrc/publications/11pubs/avery114.pdf. Causes might include mercury toxicity, warming and drying of wetland breeding sites, and the loss of these wintering sites among the swamplands of the southeastern US. It's likely that rusties face a year-round 'perfect storm' of threats. Only recently have we noticed the decline. The rusty's remote breeding sites, its lack of glamour, and its status as 'just another blackbird' relegated it to an obscure path toward oblivion – an extinction of the modest.

In Arkansas, we saved a swamp for a woodpecker that in all likelihood wasn't there. But in the process we saved swampland for rusty blackbirds. So maybe the ivory-billed woodpecker delivered some redemption after all.

Hope is indeed a powerful thing. It kept me walking and searching in Arkansas. And now, 10 years later, back home in New England, as winter retreats, the season's first

northbound rusty blackbirds are arriving. Skippers close to my home will take their first flights in May.

Meanwhile, in the US Midwest, biologists are preparing a new rescue plan for the Poweshiek skipperling. This summer they will harvest eggs from wild females in Michigan, rear the hatched caterpillars through winter in the safety of a zoo in Minnesota, and then return them to the wild in spring 2017 – just before they pupate to fly free as adult skipperlings. It might be the butterfly's last hope. And I'll be back there in Michigan waiting for them.

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