

**TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE:** Fred Collins

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

**DATE:** October 19, 2021

**LOCATION:** Houston, Texas, by remote recording

**TRANSCRIBER:** Trint, David Todd

**SOURCE MEDIA:** MP3 audio file

**REEL:** 4073 (part of a series, including 4074 and 4075)

**FILE:**

IvoryBilledWoodpecker\_Collins\_Fred\_HoustonTX\_19October2021\_17133024720\_Reel4073.m  
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**Google Voice** [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

**David Todd** [00:00:04] This is David Todd.

**Fred Collins** [00:00:06] David, Fred Collins.

**Fred Collins** [00:00:07] Yes, thank you for calling. Let's see. I was actually messing with this program and let the time slip past 2:30 without realizing that. I apologize.

**David Todd** [00:00:23] Quite all right. All right. You're nice to set aside any time for us. So thank you for doing this. I really appreciate it.

**Fred Collins** [00:00:33] Let me tell you, unfortunately, I'm here at the office this afternoon by myself, and it's possible I'll have to interrupt this. I'm assuming we can just stop the recorder or something and we can move on when it's time.

**David Todd** [00:00:49] Well, if that comes up, the simple thing is for us to hang up and for you to call back.

**Fred Collins** [00:00:56] Okay. All right.

**David Todd** [00:00:58] But yeah, thanks for alerting me to that. And I know, I know we're taking time out of your work day, so thank you for doing this.

**David Todd** [00:01:09] Did you have any questions before we get into this? I'd hasten to answer anything, if you do.

**Fred Collins** [00:01:19] Oh, no, I don't think so. And you're going to, you're going to ask questions or, and I'm going to follow prompts, or did you want to go through these.

**David Todd** [00:01:34] Yeah, yeah. I'm sort of your, your cue card.

**Fred Collins** [00:01:38] Okay.

**David Todd** [00:01:39] And I'll just pose some questions, which you've seen. And I think, you know, they're, they should be pretty straightforward. And if not, then just ask me to clarify. And we can try a different angle. But typically, we just try to follow the, the text that we've been e-mailing back and forth and, you know, keep to that.

**Fred Collins** [00:02:07] OK.

**David Todd** [00:02:08] All right.

**Fred Collins** [00:02:08] We'll see how I can do.

**David Todd** [00:02:11] I'm sure you'll be great. I'm just so fascinated by what you already wrote me, so I look forward to hearing more about that.

**David Todd** [00:02:21] But you know, if, if, if that all fits well with you, let me just give a little introduction to what we're doing and we can go ahead with the work and hear your stories.

**Fred Collins** [00:02:35] Okay. Sounds fine.

**David Todd** [00:02:37] All right. Well, with your approval, Mr. Collins, today we are planning on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, a non-profit, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. Those are our plans, but you, of course, would have all rights to use the recording as you see fit as well. And I just wanted to make sure that that plan is what you anticipated and that that sounds okay with you.

**Fred Collins** [00:03:29] Repeat that last thing again.

**David Todd** [00:03:31] I just wanted to make sure that that's what you expected.

**Fred Collins** [00:03:34] Yes.

**David Todd** [00:03:36] And this is OK with you.

**Fred Collins** [00:03:38] Yes, very good. I appreciate that. And yes, I approve of all that.

**David Todd** [00:03:42] Great. Well, let me just introduce what we are about today and then we can get started.

**Fred Collins** [00:03:51] OK.

**David Todd** [00:03:52] It is October 19, 2021. It's about 2:50 in the afternoon. My name is David Todd. I am in Austin. We are very fortunate to be conducting an interview with Fred Collins, who is based in the Houston area, so this interview is being done remotely by telephone.

**David Todd** [00:04:18] Mr. Collins is a wildlife biologist, and he wears a number of hats, including serving as director of Harris County's Cypress Top Historic Park, the Kleb Woods Nature Center and the John Paul Landing Environmental Education Center. He also has been active as a volunteer serving with the Houston Audubon Society and the Katy Prairie Conservancy, and no doubt with other groups as well. And finally, and maybe this is where our interests mostly cross paths, and that is, he's had an abiding interest in the ivory-billed woodpecker for really more than 50 years. And so we're hoping to talk about that, as well as his life and his career in wildlife conservation.

**David Todd** [00:05:14] So with that little introduction, I thought I might ask you just to start with us by telling us about your childhood and if there might have been any people or activities that were a big influence in your interest in working in nature and with birds in particular?

**Fred Collins** [00:05:35] Well, I was always interested in birds, and nobody exactly knows why. It's in my DNA, apparently. And I didn't meet anybody else that had any interest in birds until I was a young teenager. But my mother kind of indulged my, my interest.

**Fred Collins** [00:06:00] And from the time I was very small, I had a little red wagon and I would pull it around. She'd let me go to the end of the block and across the street and down in front of the houses there and then back across. So I would make this little circuit and I would pick up dead birds and I would bring them back to the backyard and I would bury them, make a little wooden cross for them and give them a proper Christian burial. And so that was, that's my earliest remembrance of that.

**Fred Collins** [00:06:35] She let me sit in front of the TV Saturday morning and I'd watch Roy Rogers movies and Hopalong Cassidy and I would draw and paint birds the whole time that I was watching them and we would get those colored Easter chicks every year, and she would let me raise those up to full-size chickens.

**Fred Collins** [00:06:58] And then when I was very young, I got a pet. I talked them into letting me have a parakeet and I was really too young to take care of it. And she took care, or she would take care of it. And I named that parakeet Davy Crockett. That was a, Davy Crockett was the big thing when I was a little boy growing up. I had a coonskin cap and all that. But anyway, so but what happened is she was cleaning the cage. She was a fastidious, she was a fanatic for cleaning things and she was cleaning the cage and with the vacuum cleaner and knocked the bottom off, and then the bird flew off and got away. And it turns out that would be something that would happen from time to time with my birds and my mother. I don't know if she got tired of taking care of them, but I invariably got another one.

**Fred Collins** [00:07:53] But, and then one of my aunts lived down in Texas City, and she worked at Schlumberger and she would drive up the Houston and drop my cousin off, and he and I would go to school together. And she brought me a picture of a cattle egret sitting on the back of a cow, and that was only a year or two after they had found their way to Texas back in the '50s and so on in hindsight, it was pretty remarkable.

**Fred Collins** [00:08:26] But then when I was 15, I went down to visit another aunt and uncle and my cousins who lived in Venezuela. And my uncle was a big hunter, and he had a bunch of hunting friends. And so on the weekends when he wasn't working, we would go out hunting. And it was the middle of the summer and we would shoot birds and I would take those birds home and I would spend all week trying to figure out what they all were. And I would draw pictures of them and I would stuff some of them and stuff like that.

**Fred Collins** [00:09:00] So although I didn't have a specific mentor, so to speak, my family, certainly my immediate family and my extended family, certainly indulged my interest, that was for sure.

**Fred Collins** [00:09:16] Something I vividly remember. I was, I think I was 15, maybe have been 14. I guess it was 14. We went to, we went camping in Colorado - Rocky Mountain National Park. And they had a bird walk, and I went on that bird walk. And that was the first

time I ever went birdwatching with anyone. And the leader was a temporary summer employee and he was a birdwatcher and obviously he was from somewhere on the East Coast. And a bird would fly up and like it was a yellow-rumped warbler. In those days, it was either an Audubon's warbler or a myrtle warbler. And he would said, Oh, there is a myrtle warbler there.

**Fred Collins** [00:10:10] And I looked at it and it had a yellow throat and I said, "Sure, don't you mean an Audubon's warbler? It's got a yellow throat and that's a western variety, you know? And so, and two or three more things like that happened and before I knew it, as soon as a new bird popped up, everybody in the group would turn and look at me before they would open their mouth. And it was like, "Oh, I really know how to identify birds. And it was kind of a light going on for me. But I remember that vividly, to say the least.

**David Todd** [00:10:46] It's nice to get that kind of affirmation that you're good at something when you're a young person.

**Fred Collins** [00:10:52] Yeah, it is, and it was, and since I have never, ever been with anybody that watched birds, you know, I just didn't really know what to expect or anything. So it was, it was, it was nice that I knew what I was doing, to find that out, yes.

**David Todd** [00:11:12] And were there any sort of informal kinds of education you might have gotten in your childhood, from books or TV shows or movies, or any sort of cultural artifacts?

**Fred Collins** [00:11:31] Well, yes. Here again, my mother would have told me and she enrolled me in me some classes down at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. And back in those days, the Houston Museum of Natural Science was in the zoo, and it was in an old bird house building. And it was, looked like a green World War Two barracks or something. And it was a kind of a dark and dingy building. And it had rows and rows of trays on tables, one after the other. And, you know, you'd just walk down those aisles and stuff was all jumbled together, so in one thing there would be a bunch of maybe bird eggs and the next one, there would be a bunch of shells. And then down at the end of the row, there was a bunch of sunken heads (I wanted them, so), or shrunken heads, rather. So it was a very bizarre thing and it was it was halfway scary, but it was also just, just overly stimulating.

**Fred Collins** [00:12:56] But I took classes at that thing, and I think it was a weekly class for a good while. But at any rate, I did that. And then my family bought me bird books. And there's a, there's a bird book, Birds of America. It was, it was first published in the 1890s, I think. And they kept reprinting it and updating it, and I think it was last printed about 1940. And it had a bunch of black and white photographs, which were extremely poor by today's standards. But there was a lot of information - life history, information and observational observation data - on every bird species. And that was, that was kind of one of the books I cut my teeth on in.

**Fred Collins** [00:13:53] And then at some point, I got a hold of a copy of Roger Tory Peterson's, I think it was called Birding America. I can't remember what the name of it was. He and Fisher wrote it. And they had, Fisher was an ornithologist in England, and he had come over to the United States, and Peterson had taken him all over the United States bird watching one year, and they did this big year. And a lot of, a lot of bird watchers of my age were inspired by that book, and we wanted to go see all the birds in all of America because of that.

**Fred Collins** [00:14:40] Later on, after I was actually out of college, in my first summer job, I had a chance to read "Adventures with a Texas Naturalist". And that's Bedichek's book, and I recommend it to any and everybody that would take time to read it. But what was remarkable is that was my first job after I graduated and I had, in fact I got a summer job as a naturalist at a boy's camp. And it was Friday Mountain Boys' Camp up over south of Austin, down toward Wimberley, kind of in that Dripping Springs / Wimberley area.

**Fred Collins** [00:15:25] And Friday Mountain was a, was a famous place. It had been a stagecoach stop in the 1850s. And it was built as a fortress, basically, because the Comanches would hit it periodically. And so it was literally built that you could hole up inside of there until the Indians went away. It had been owned by the historian Webb and Bedichek was a friend of Webb's and Frank Dobie. The three of them were swimming buddies, and they would hang out in Austin all the time together, and they would come to Friday Mountain sometime and camp out or something. But anyway, a fellow named Captain Kidd, who knew those guys real well, he ended up buying that Friday Mountain ranch from Webb and created this boy's camp, and it operated for a long time.

**Fred Collins** [00:16:45] And so this was this was in 1971, and environmental stuff was really important, and all these camper parents wanted a better quality of nature program. And so he went down to A&M and he hired two of us out of A&M to run his nature program for him that summer. And so we would work, I think we can't remember now what it was. We worked for like six or seven days, and then we were off two days.

**Fred Collins** [00:17:26] And so anyway, when I had time off, I decided I was going to read this book. Well, it turns out Adventures with a Texas Naturalist by Roy Bedichek - he went and stayed at Webb's ranch to write the book. And Captain Kidd was so impressed with all that he left the room that Bedichek wrote the book in just the way it was when Bedichek was there writing it. And in fact, in the introduction Bedichek describes exactly what this room looks like all the way around.

**Fred Collins** [00:18:05] And so I went up there and I would sit in this room where Bedichek wrote this book, and I would read it, and I was sitting there reading the introduction. And, you know, he'd said well the desk was sitting here and I looked up and the desk was there, and this was there, and this was there. And I'd go, go one through the over and it was set up exactly right, even down to the crumpled-up pages of his legal pad that were false starts. And they were in the garbage can and there were some yellow crumpled-up sheets in there. And, so he had set it up exactly right. And then Bedichek says, and I looked up in the ceiling at a knot in the ceiling in this canyon wren peered down and looked at me. And I looked at sure enough, there was a knot. And just about the time I looked up and saw that knot, a canyon wren stuck its head through that knot and looked at me.

**Fred Collins** [00:19:00] So I was hooked on Bedichek for the rest of my life.

**David Todd** [00:19:07] Boy, that's uncanny. Feels like not just reading the book, but reliving its, its writing. That's extraordinary. Well, you mentioned A&M. Can you talk a little bit about your, your, your tenure there? I think that you got a BS in Wildlife Sciences from A&M and then also studied for a master's degree there. Were their experiences or mentors there?

**Fred Collins** [00:19:36] Yes. A&M was, was a great place for me. I knew what I wanted to study, but you can't figure out which department that's in when you go to school and it takes a while. But I was fortunate enough - I started off in biology, but everybody in biology was pre-

med and it was all basic biology. It wasn't plants and animals. And I wanted to know about plants and animals and so finally, somebody told me that I needed to be in the wildlife science department.

**Fred Collins** [00:20:17] So I went up and talked to somebody in the wildlife science department and the person that they gave me to was Dr. Richard Baldauf and Dr. Baldauf, was there was a classic character. He always wore a bow tie, even when he was out in the field in khakis, he had a brown bow tie that matched his khakis, so he wore that.

**Fred Collins** [00:20:44] But anyway, he had a very peculiar way of talking which people liked to imitate. I do a bad job, so I won't try, but my friend Dennis Shepler could do a great Baldauf. But anyway, so Baldauf's talking to me and telling me about the wildlife department and answering my questions and whatnot. And he's sitting at his desk talking to me, and all of a sudden he says, "Wait. Just a second." And he popped up from his desk and he walked over around behind me, and he opened a little office refrigerator, pulls out a skink. Puts it in this diorama he has sitting right next to him. Looks all over it. He has a camera and a tripod set up in front of this diorama. And he takes some pictures of this skink and he keeps looking at it real close and taking some more pictures. And he says, "You've got to hurry because if they get too cold, their eyes frost over and it doesn't look right." And then he did that and he took it and he put it back in the refrigerator, went and sat down, continued our conversations.

**Fred Collins** [00:21:59] So that was my introduction to Richard Baldauf, who, much to my amazement, would remain my friend for almost the next 50 year, so. But he certainly was somebody that looked after me all those years.

**Fred Collins** [00:22:16] And his fellow herpetologist was Jim Dixon. And eventually, after I graduated and when I was in graduate school, I got to know about Dr. Dixon much better. And then after school, I continued to know him.

**Fred Collins** [00:22:34] [Look, I didn't do that.].

**Fred Collins** [00:22:37] Anyway, Dr. Dixon remained good friends with him and talked to him on a regular basis for 50 years.

**Fred Collins** [00:22:46] And one of my other professors was David Schmidly. And David Schmidly was a mammalogist and we had some interesting experiences in Mexico together.

**Fred Collins** [00:22:59] And then Dr. Teer was the department head and I never really, never had him for a class, an occasional lecture maybe and didn't feel like I knew him that well, but apparently he knew me a lot better than I knew him and after I graduated, for the, for the next 40 years, you know, something would happen and Dr. Teer would steer somebody my way, and vice versa. And I got to know him better, the longer I knew him.

**Fred Collins** [00:23:37] And Fred Smeins was in the range science department, and he was a very interesting person and a great ecologist and was an inspiration, and I've remained in contact with Dr. Smeins.

**Fred Collins** [00:23:52] But of course, my major professor was Keith Arnold and Dr. Arnold was the ornithologist at A&M. And that was my primary interest and focus and so I, I got to know him much better. And he was running a program, he had a federal contract to study Wilson's snipe. And Wilson's snipe was a game bird, but they knew, but the Fish and Wildlife

Service knew the least about snipe than they did any of the other game animals. And so they gave a couple of different universities contracts to study snipe. And Dr. Arnold had that before I came to A&M. And it was in effect, it was a 10-year program. And so he had a number of different graduate students working on that program, and they would hire undergraduate students as technicians, and we would catch snipe.

**Fred Collins** [00:24:57] And so I started, started on the snipe crew in '69, I think, maybe it was '68. Anyway, I was on, I caught snipe for, I guess it was three years, no, two and a half years as an undergraduate, and then two years as a graduate student. And I studied their movements in the central, Brazos valley for, for my thesis and worked on that, on that project for two and a half years and finished all my courses.

**Fred Collins** [00:25:32] But then I moved to Houston to help my parents out. My family had an auto parts business, wholesale auto parts business, and my grandfather had started that business in the '20s and they had some difficulties and really wanted me to help out. And of course, I worked there my whole life until I'd come to A&M, and so I came down to help them out for a while, and that helping them out for a while turned into 18 years. And so I got sidetracked about getting my master's thesis written and turned in, but had completed everything else otherwise.

**David Todd** [00:26:14] It's interesting how life sometimes throw some, some traffic cones and diversions and detours. Well, let's talk a little bit more about, about your career as a biologist. How did you first find your way to work as a biologist? I think you served at Harris County in a number of positions and then also as a consultant. Tell us a little bit about the background of that.

**Fred Collins** [00:26:51] Well, when I got out of the auto parts business and not of our own free will, that was in the, in the 1980s, we went through that oil bust and everything in Houston went broke. And we hadn't realized we were in the oil business, but a number of our customers' customers were servicing oil-related businesses. And most of those businesses will into them for 90 days accounts receivable, and they were into our customers for 90 days accounts receivable, and they were into us for.... So it just kept stepping up the chain.

**Fred Collins** [00:27:37] And so all of a sudden, the business that my family had had for a long time, and it was owned by the entire family, not just my father. But anyway, it was no longer profitable and people were losing money left and right. And businesses were closing. And the banks were in the same position and the banks started squeezing everybody for everything they could get out of them. So anyway, one thing led to another and the family decided to go ahead and close that business.

**Fred Collins** [00:28:15] And so anyway, they closed that business in '88, and I had, in the meantime, started a chain of my own stores with my brother-in-law, and those stores were losing money. And we ended up having to close those, and we closed the last one and I got out of the business at the end of '91.

**Fred Collins** [00:28:43] And so in '92, my friend Ted Eubanks, who I had known, birded with, for 20 years at that point, he, he had started a side business that he called for Fermata. He was in the delivery business at the time and I used him, I used his business just to service my businesses. And so I had been his customer. And he had hired me to work as a biologist for - he had a contract in Fish and Wildlife Service - to study Eskimo curlews to see if they could

find Eskimo curlew. And Ted had the contract, but he didn't have time to do the field work. So he hired me and I worked for Ted for about 18 months and we completed that project.

**Fred Collins** [00:29:44] And in the process of, and then after that, I just started raising parrots full-time and doing consulting work on the side, freelance. And I started working for a friend of mine, Katie Northrup. And she and her husband had a planning and development business called Northrup and Associates. And Katie did the wildlife and wetlands assessments. And so she started hiring me to help her do that. And so I would work, contract work, with them.

**Fred Collins** [00:30:22] And then I got involved in with Bert Oliver. Bert Oliver was the largest environmental consultant in the early, back in that time period.

**Fred Collins** [00:30:34] And so I worked for both of them for about 20 years, doing special projects as they came up. And then I also did some freelance directly for some other customers. So I ended up doing consulting work for about 20 years.

**Fred Collins** [00:30:53] And but I was looking for steady employment, so to speak, and Hana Ginzburg who I had met, I had met Hana in a very strange circumstance, and I'd met her when I was up at A&M and it was pretty, it was a really funny story, one of those strange things that happened. But she was trying to raise money and public awareness and whatnot to create Armand Bayou and Armand Bayou Nature Center. And Hana's real good at stirring the pot. She had, she was kind of a protege of Terry Hershey's. And Hana had first helped Terry with the Bayou Preservation Association, which Terry managed to get a lot of the bayous in the area preserved. And Terry inspired Hana, and Hana decided that she was going to get Armand Bayou preserved and make this nature center down there.

**Fred Collins** [00:32:04] And Hana was real good at beating drums, and so she had these, she had scheduled in the Houston Chronicle, and this was back in the 1970s when the Houston Chronicle, you know, everybody in Houston read the Houston Chronicle, and she had scheduled these nature walks so people could see and understand Armand Bayou. But she needed some guides, and she didn't have any guides, and so she decided to call A&M University and see if they couldn't supply her with some guides for this thing that she was pulling off. And I think she talked to James Teer, but she may have talked to, well, I know she talked to Jim Teer. I don't know if Teer passed it off to Arnold or exactly what. I forget now. But anyway, they knew I lived down in the area. And so they asked me if I wanted to do it, and I said, "Okay, I'll do it." And, they said, "You know, you need to see if you can take four people with you down there."

**Fred Collins** [00:33:07] And so I got three of my wildlife buddy friends and we drove down to Armand Bayou. I think it was, I think it was a Sunday morning. And we drove down there from College Station and got out of the car and there were cars everywhere. There was traffic all over the place. And we finally found Hana and she said, "Yeah, we're going to have these nature walks and all these people are here to go on this nature walk." We looked around and said, "What?" She said, and she said, "Yeah, these people all came down here for this nature walk. That's what we're doing here today."

**Fred Collins** [00:33:53] Well, there were people everywhere. It was it was incredible. It was ... we talked to one of the cops and he estimated that there were 10,000 people there. And we're supposed to do nature walks with ten thousand people, four of us. And so we, the four of us, scattered ourselves down this trail that went down along the side of the bayou, and we would



just come to an interesting, you know, we picked an interesting spot. And we would stay there. And these people that were literally one after the other, like you were standing in line to vote or something, they, they would move through. And when a group of them moved up in front of you, you would start talking about whatever it was, you were interpreting. Maybe it was a yaupon, or Indian midden or whatever. And, and then after you kind of ran out of breath, they would move along and another group would move up and stop in front of you and you would do it all again. And that went on all, it went on for hours. It was the most awful thing I ever had to do in my life. And it was like I was in some kind of distorted ride out at Disney World or something. It was very peculiar.

**Fred Collins** [00:35:14] So anyway, that's how I met Hannah. And off and on over the years, I'd talked to her pretty regularly. And she eventually succeeded and she wanted to put a nature center and they were trying to hire an executive director, and she wanted to hire me. And by that time, I was working in my family business and I told her, "No."

**Fred Collins** [00:35:40] But then 20 years later, she was working on a new preserve, Russ Pitman Park in Bellaire, and created a little two and a half acre park right there at Newcastle, and Evergreen and Bellaire. They were, they would have a nature center there in the old Henshaw House, and it was called the Nature Discovery Center. And she was looking for an executive director for the Nature Discovery Center, and she asked me if I would do that, and this time I said, "Yes." And so I became the director of the Nature Discovery Center, and I did that for eight years before I was eventually hired by the Steve Radack to develop Kleb Woods Nature Preserve and build a nature center out at Kleb Woods.

**Fred Collins** [00:36:35] And so I came to work for the County in 2002 and we got Kleb open, and in the meantime, we got a chance to accept the Cypress Top Historic Park from Gene Zaboroski, you know, along with Ray Miller, I was talked by the Commissioner into doing that. And we accepted that park. And so I built that park out. And then in 2019, 2020, no, yep, 2020, the Commissioner built and opened John Paul Landing Environmental Education Center, and I've inherited that place to take care of and provide staffing for. So now I have to three parks, and our staff that we have manage three different parks and try to keep them all serving the public and creating opportunities for everybody that visits. It's, it's, it's been quite a ride.

**David Todd** [00:37:49] Well, it's so interesting to hear the trajectory of your life from, you know, as a child, learning about the dead birds that you find on the road to, you know, visiting with your uncle and finding these, these birds that he had hunted and killed, you know, to working on the, going to the Houston Natural Museum of Natural Science and looking at the trays of artifacts - every possible kind of education. And then sort of turning the tables where you're teaching other people, through these nature centers at Kleb and Cypress Top and John Paul Landing. Come, come full circle in a sense.

**Fred Collins** [00:38:33] You know it does. And I guess it was destined to be. When I was a kid, down at our bay house, my grandfather's bay house, that all of us cousins spent the summer down there together. Somebody found this snake, and I think it was a racer. At the time. I don't think, I knew what kind of snake it was. And that was in this in the '60s, or maybe, actually it's probably in the '50s, early '60s at the latest. But anyway, this, this snake had all these big lumps in it. And so this this snake was caught and killed, and I don't actually, I don't remember killing it personally, but I may have, but I don't really remember. But anyway, as soon as we got our hands on the snake, I decided I was going to cut it open and see what it ate. Of course I'd seen on TV where they had, you know, they would do that in Africa on these safaris, they would find these snakes with these things in them.

**Fred Collins** [00:39:36] So anyway, I took that snake and I cut it open. And sure enough, there were three freshly dead baby cottontails in it. And all my cousins were all hanging around watching all this. And what's funny is we, my cousins get together every once in a while, and here we are sixty years later and we're still talking about that snake. So that made an impression on them, and I've paid attention to wildlife my whole life. And so I guess it was ingrained, it was destined in me somewhere that I was going to show people nature and get them to appreciate what was there.

**Fred Collins** [00:40:14] And I think it's also ironic that my intention when I was about at A&M was just to become an ornithology professor and, but the first job that I got offered for a summer job out of college was as a naturalist in a nature center type situation. So I guess the Lord was telling me something. I just didn't listen well.

**David Todd** [00:40:43] Well, it's great to think of how many people you've touched at these different nature centers. And I'm hoping that you can share some of your expertise today. You know, one of the species that is certainly iconic, if it still exists, but certainly important for Texas, and the south and bottomland hardwoods, is this ivory-billed woodpecker. And I was hoping that you could just introduce the listeners to the bird's life history and then maybe talk a little bit about its range, particularly in Texas.

**Fred Collins** [00:41:32] Okay. Well, the ivory-billed woodpecker is the largest woodpecker in North America. And it's the second largest woodpecker in the world. There was a, it had a larger cousin, the ivory-billed woodpecker is a crow-sized woodpecker, and the imperial ivory-bill of Mexico was a raven-sized woodpecker, a really, really massive bird. And it was very similar to our ivory-bill in many ways. It also apparently is extinct.

**Fred Collins** [00:42:16] But anyway, back to the ivory-bill woodpecker. It's a large bird and it's got a crest. And the females have a black crest and the males have a red crest. And, and as the name implies, they have a very light-colored bill that's reminiscent of ivory.

**Fred Collins** [00:42:39] And the birds probably were never abundant anywhere, at any time, because, and I say that because some of the Native American tribes used the ivory bill's bill, as a form of currency. And it would be traded as something of value that they could trade other things for. And if something was common and easily obtained, its, its bill would not have any value. So these things had to be rare and/or difficult to obtain, or both. And I think that was the case with the ivory-billed woodpecker.

**Fred Collins** [00:43:22] They, they were a large woodpecker, and they preferred large grubs: was their known preferred food item. And in order for there to be a big enough supply, they have to use a large area, but also there has to be an abundance of dead wood. And dead wood, abundance of dead wood can happen two ways: you can have some kind of disaster that kills lots of trees, or in lieu of a disaster, you have very old forests. And the older a tree is, the more dead wood it has in it. And so virgin forests have a lot, a much larger percentage, of dead wood than a younger forest. And so these, these mature, virgin forests had more suitable food items than a comparable younger forest.

**Fred Collins** [00:44:29] And ivory-bills required really a lot of space. They required close to 4000 acres of space per pair, of virgin habitat. And as a comparison, in that same area where you'd have one, every ivory-bill, you might have 36 pairs of pileated woodpeckers, which are also a big, you know, crow-sized bird. So, and then there in that same area, there would be like

216 pair of red-bellied woodpeckers, and that many or more downy woodpeckers. So you'd have all these woodpeckers living in this space, but only one pair of ivory-bills. And so that was obviously, that bird couldn't be abundant if it was taken up that much space.

**Fred Collins** [00:45:25] And ivory-bills had a different style of flight than most of other woodpeckers. And their flight is, was more like a duck - very fast and direct and so they were capable of covering long distances. All woodpeckers have a tendency to fly long distances, on occasion, and they, woodpeckers are known to be vagrants, even non-migratory species often show up way out of place. And the ivory-bill probably fit that same situation.

**Fred Collins** [00:46:02] Now one of the reasons they're like that, is that they'll take advantage of, for instance, there is a big kill, you know, maybe there was a forest fire or something, killed a lot of trees. And all of a sudden there's this, there's this unusual, isolated habitat, where there's a lot of good dead wood that they can feed on. And so woodpeckers need to be able to find that and travel to that sort of thing. And so woodpeckers, all of them, travel a great deal and ivory-bill having such a huge home range to start with, obviously they could travel a long way. So they probably show up where they don't belong frequently, or probably did once upon a time. That's just kind of the nature of the life history of a species.

**Fred Collins** [00:46:52] Their range was fairly, fairly restricted. It was across the southeastern United States, and up the Mississippi River, and then back down into East Texas, over as far as the Brazos River. But they were concentrated along the water courses, as opposed to covering the entire southeastern United States.

**Fred Collins** [00:47:21] The, the imperial ivory-bill and the ivory-bill that occurred in Cuba, that was probably just nothing more than a subspecies of our ivory-bill, but anyway, both of those other birds use pine forest a great deal. But, I don't think that that was because they were intended to be pine specialists. I think they were more likely to have been forced to use that pine because the habitat changed.

**Fred Collins** [00:47:58] And so I think ivory-bills were generally birds of probably bottomland, highly diverse virgin forest. And when that habitat disappeared, they became, as the habitat, became fragmented, it became more and more difficult for the ivory-bills to survive.

**David Todd** [00:48:20] So if I'm following you, the ivory-bills was, was kind of a specialist and more focused in the bottomland hardwood forest, is that correct?

**Fred Collins** [00:48:33] Yeah, that's what I believe. There have been some people that have claimed that they were in the pine forest. And the, the reason I don't buy that story is because if we look at North America 20 or 30 or 50 thousand years ago, before humans in North America, and that is, I don't know, I, I can't cite a study for the southeastern United States. I don't know if they have confirmed it, but they have some excellent studies out in the American Southwest and in Arizona and New Mexico, where, 20,000 years ago there were almost no pine trees anywhere else in the West. Ponderosa pine had extremely limited distribution.

**Fred Collins** [00:49:35] Well, then when you go look at 9000 years ago, ponderosa pine got a large distribution. And if you look at it today, it's even larger.

**Fred Collins** [00:49:49] And so what happened? What happened was people showed up. And people set fires to drive game and to make habitat better for the game that they wanted to

hunt. And pine trees require fires to become dominant. And so the same thing probably holds for the southeastern United States. Pine trees probably were not as widespread before people showed up and started setting fire to the habitat. And then pines spread. And the original pine forest, if you look at a virgin longleaf pine forest, prior to 1900, there were a lot of really old trees in the forest, a lot of really old loblolly, excuse me, longleaf pines. One three hundred and fifty year old longleaf pine would take up as much space as 60 90-year old pine trees.

**Fred Collins** [00:51:13] And so, you can see that there could have been, once upon a time, just a few very large longleaf pines. And then the rest of the habitat was probably mostly grassland. But when the big herbivores, which included a lot of elephants and ground sloths that pushed down trees and kept the habitat open, when those animals disappeared, the habitat became the type that you saw that the first European settlers describe when they came here.

**Fred Collins** [00:51:53] So the ivory-bill would have adapted to that forest before people came. There weren't that many pine trees. I don't think there could have been a pine specialist. And that's, that's, that's one of the reasons that I don't agree with the pine specialists.

**Fred Collins** [00:52:12] And in an island situations in Cuba, you don't have near as much competition and animals generally tend to broaden their habitat usage, and so that's probably why you're seeing, and the only large trees in Cuba were pine trees, so that's why the ivory-bill in Cuba probably uses pine trees.

**Fred Collins** [00:52:35] And the same thing may be the fact of what's happened with the imperial ivory-bill, because they predominantly use a ponderosa forest. Well those ponderosa forests didn't exist 13,000 years ago, so they were certainly doing something else before 13,000 years ago. They didn't just pop up in the last 13,000. They're an old species.

**David Todd** [00:53:03] This is so intriguing, and I'm just speculating and I'm wading in far deeper than I should. But would this mean that a bird like the red-cockaded woodpecker, which is so adapted to fire-dominant pine forests, would have come in to southeastern United States long after the ivory-billed Woodpecker?

**Fred Collins** [00:53:28] No, it was, it was there, but it was probably much more restricted in numbers and habitat, almost like it is today because there just weren't ... but, well, let me rephrase that. Red-cockaded woodpeckers don't have to have really old trees. They need a tree, red heart wood, that has red heart wood, which happens at about 80 years of age. And considering the lifespan of a longleaf pine, that's not particularly old.

**Fred Collins** [00:54:03] So there was, there was plenty of habitat for them. There was probably, you know, there would be some, some disaster or some set of circumstances that would provide a stand of pines. Red-cockaded can, you know, they can live within 600 acres - is a lot of habitat for Woodpecker. And compare that to 4000 acres for an ivory-bill. So the red-cockaded woodpecker was there, but it was probably not as widespread, it was probably more isolated and local.

**David Todd** [00:54:48] Okay. Well, that's helpful. So you've been talking about time in the course of thousands of years. I was hoping that you might be able to kind of focus in on the last hundred and fifty years or so. I understand that the last really widely accepted ivory-bill that had been noted in Texas were two specimens that were collected around 1904. And while

they're rare to begin with, I guess what you've been saying, they became extremely rare and I was hoping you could help me understand what the reasons were behind their rarity and their decline.

**Fred Collins** [00:55:36] Well, the, the disappearance of virgin forest was, was what caused their decline. And that occurred throughout the United States and kind of the last bastion of southeastern U.S. timberland was in Texas. And this is, this is the last place that all of the virgin timber was cut, pretty much, was in Texas. And so the decline of these birds and the further reduction of their space that they occupied kept occurring, slowly but surely, as giant forests got cut down. And, so that's without a doubt in my mind, the number one reason for the decline.

**Fred Collins** [00:56:32] There were, there's also been a lot of speculation that, that museum collecting specimens caused their extermination. And you can make a good case for that argument because by the 1920s, most of the forests had been logged and the last few remnants were being logged in a lot of cases. And these ivory-bills had become difficult to find, and they were in these few remote woodlands in different places. And these museums at the time (so, you know, the economy was great in the 1910s and then in the Roaring Twenties, and these people were building these fabulous museums and they wanted these specimens to be in their museum. And so they would send out these contract hunters to bring back specimens. And the ivory-bill was the specimen that was, you know, you couldn't go to your local woodlot and get one and put it in your exhibit. You had to send out to these special places. And these, these, these specimen collections certainly put a significant dent in what ivory-bills survived the mass lumber attack. So those two things went hand-in-hand and one followed the other, and that's severely limited the population. There's no two ways about it.

**Fred Collins** [00:58:10] It had been suggested that that pot-hunting during the Depression caused some of that. But ivory-bills are hard to find, and they're hard to, they're hard to shoot. And they're a good-sized birds, but they're not that great, so I'm sure that a few ivory-bills found their way into somebody's stew pot, but I don't think it had any significant impact.

**Fred Collins** [00:58:40] I think the thing that probably was the final death knell for those ivory-bills in Texas was there were still some good, uncut bottomland forest. And the reason they had avoided being cut was because it was too difficult to get the logs out. And when they, when they came in and timbered Texas so extensively and really changed it, they primarily were taking out the pine trees, because that was the better timber lumber. And everybody wanted Louisiana yellow pine. Well that's longleaf pine - didn't matter where it came from. And longleaf pine was, was a standing crop of lumber that was not going to be replaced. And, so, so that, those forests were cut over and they hauled that stuff off.

**Fred Collins** [00:59:44] But some of this bottomland timber had been ignored because it was so much harder to get out of the bottoms. If the river didn't come up enough where they could float it out, it was just almost impossible to get it out of there. And the value of it was not great enough, and the quantity not great enough, and the quality not predictable enough for them to get that stuff out.

**Fred Collins** [01:00:06] So there were a lot of big trees left in bottomland forests in Texas, especially on the Neches River, on the Sabine River and some on the Trinity. The Colorado flows a little bit better and, excuse me, the Brazos flows a little bit better, and it's got a big wide floodplain. And I think a lot of that forest may have been cut and hauled down. A lot of that forest was also live oak trees, and live oak trees were valuable for shipping industry, and

a lot of that got taken pretty early. But there's certainly, even today, there are some, there are some live oak trees in the Columbia Bottomlands that are several hundred years old. So a lot of that forest never got cut.

**Fred Collins** [01:00:56] But in East Texas, they created, they started in the '60s, in the '50s and '60s, they created all these great reservoirs - Lake Livingston and Toledo Bend, and all those places. And they, they flooded the last of the bottomland and those were the best, probably the best habitats and the best, probably held pairs of birds. And I think the sightings that were made in the '60s in the Big Thicket, basically, a lot of those were probably birds that were driven out of those big bottomland forests that were flooded by the reservoirs. It coincides - the filling of the reservoirs and the sightings of the woodpeckers. They go hand-in-hand.

**David Todd** [01:01:49] So the ivory-bills might have been flushed out of these areas that had been logged and they were looking for new habitat, new trees, to work on or to nest in?

**Fred Collins** [01:02:02] You know what, when, when the areas were logged primarily in or in, you know, as late as the 1920s, those, those birds found less habitat and they settled back in these bottomland remnants. But then in the '60s, the '50s and '60s, these bottomland remnants started disappearing because they were flooding them for reservoirs. And so then, the birds were going up to secondary habitat and habitat that they may be able to survive in, but wouldn't prosper in.

**Fred Collins** [01:02:36] And I think that's a lot of what we saw in Texas in the 1960s and '70s, is these birds that had been, had lost their best habitat, and they were just kind of floating around looking for a way to survive and raise babies in a, in a secondary type habitat.

**David Todd** [01:02:54] I see - not their first choice now. Yes. So this brings us up to the late '60s and early '70s, and this is about the time, I think, 1970 in fact, when you wrote this really interesting article, "The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker in Texas."

**Fred Collins** [01:03:15] Right.

**David Todd** [01:03:16] And I'm curious what drew you to that subject? And maybe you can tell us a little bit about the situation at that time with the woodpecker.

**Fred Collins** [01:03:27] Well, okay, I'll, I'll do that. Excuse me, just a second. It was I had become aware of the ivory-billed woodpecker as a as a young fellow. I'd gone over to Louisiana, to New Orleans, with, with one of my aunts and uncles and cousins, and we had gone out to a plantation outside of New Orleans, where Audubon had, had been a tutor, and he had hunted birds and painted birds, while he was tutoring these children of this plantation owner. And I got to see a bunch of his paintings there, and I think they may have had an ivory-bill woodpecker there. Anyway, I saw that image that he had painted. And it's one of his great images that he painted and, of course, it's an iconic bird, and so it kind of sticks in your mind.

**Fred Collins** [01:04:40] And I'd grown up in Houston, but had had relatively few forays out into East Texas, but the Big Thicket is huge in Texas lore and so I certainly was well aware of the Big Thicket. And in the fall of 1968, I was at A&M and I'd gotten to meet a fellow named Bill Mealey, who was, he was the director of the, I think, the Texas Museum at Washington-on-the-Brazos. They were just building it and he was setting up some of the first exhibits, and he was very interested in nature and birding and whatnot. And he knew about this Big Thicket

Pilgrimage, which they were having over there, and he called me and invited me to go. And so we drove over and met him and, no, he came and picked us up. That's right. He, he came and picked us up at A&M. And some of us went over there with him to go to this Big Thicket Pilgrimage.

**Fred Collins** [01:05:52] And it was being held by the Big Thicket Association, and the Big Thicket Association was promoting this proposed Big Thicket National Park. And so they were trying to get people over there to see, see the cool things that you could see that would, could become part of the park. And it was first time I've been over there with a bunch of naturalists and birdwatchers, and they took us to the bogs to see all orchids and azaleas, and blueberries, and carnivorous plants. And took us out to longleaf pine stands where the Bachman warbler, or excuse me, Bachman's sparrow. And that was the first Bachman's sparrow I ever saw on that trip.

**Fred Collins** [01:06:38] And they took us to this really famous tract called the Sternberg Tract. Today, it's part of the Kirby Nature Trail. And anyway, in the Sternberg tract, they showed us a loblolly pine that they said was fifteen hundred years old. And they showed us that it was over six feet in diameter. And then they showed us some bald cypress, that was 2500 years old or more. And they were huge trees and very impressive.

**Fred Collins** [01:07:11] And, and it was at the Sternberg tract that I kind of saw something that got me really thinking about ivory-billed woodpecker, and what it was, that they showed us two partially dead sweet gum trees that had some very peculiar bark damage that had been, that the bark had been removed. And we were told that these were the distinctive workings of the ivory-billed woodpecker. And that John Dennis had watched these birds doing that, and he had taken pictures of these workings, and that's where he had gotten audio recordings of ivory-billed woodpecker. And that was in 1966.

**Fred Collins** [01:07:57] And so I took pictures of those, those distinctive workings. And, unfortunately, I was young and we were using film - it wasn't digital camera. Two weeks later, I got my film back and my pictures were out of focus. And so my ivory-bill woodpecker proof, so to speak, is out of focus. And that's funny because for the next 50 years, I would see lots of out-of-focus, blurry ivory-bill woodpecker documentation. And so that was really something.

**Fred Collins** [01:08:39] But anyway, but it was it was amazing to sit there and look at this and go, "Wow! A living, breathing ivory-billed woodpecker did this!" And so I became very, very interested in ivory-bill woodpeckers at that point in time.

**Fred Collins** [01:09:04] But then, something else happened. We were all sitting around a campfire at night before we went to sleep, and talking about ivory-billed woodpecker. And, of course, a bunch of people said there's not any, and a bunch of people said there are some. There was a very quiet young man named Neil White and he, he, he was claiming that they were there. He was a little adamant, but he didn't, he didn't say a whole lot. And he just got up and left, kind of abruptly.

**Fred Collins** [01:09:47] And about an hour later, he showed up. It was pretty late then. It was probably 11 o'clock, maybe later, and there were not too many of us. But of course, some of us college kids, we'd stay up forever. And he came back and he handed me a, a slide in a, in a slide viewer. And I looked at it and then he gave me another slide, another slide. And he had pictures of ivory-bill woodpecker. He had both males and females, sometime together. And they were not close-up pictures. But, but they were clear pictures and you could definitely see

the birds perched. And they would be perched in different places and in different postures. So they were clearly not models. And, and he said that he had been watching this pair nest for the last three years in this same tree.

**Fred Collins** [01:10:42] And he wouldn't tell anybody where it was. And he was extremely secretive and he wouldn't let anybody follow him, and he was so careful that when he left to go do that, if you know somebody tried to follow him, they couldn't figure out which direction from town he left even. And so he was, he was quite a sly fellow.

**Fred Collins** [01:11:10] But from his descriptions and the behavior - what the birds were doing and where they acted and whatnot - he would have had to have really studied Tanner's book extremely carefully. Or he would have had to have talked to somebody who had observed them or in fact, he had observed them himself.

**Fred Collins** [01:11:34] And I found him credible. And he was very odd. And he was completely unwilling to share where these birds were. He, he seemed credible to me.

**Fred Collins** [01:11:48] And at that point, you know, I just knew that there were ivory-bill woodpeckers in East Texas and, and so that's how everything began. And, you know, in hindsight, I think it's very odd that I didn't try and go back over there and find those birds. But of course, I was a student. I didn't have a car, and I was very busy in class, and had a job catching snipe on the weekend. And I just never I just never went back over there.

**Fred Collins** [01:12:22] And, but then a couple of, a few years later, Victor Emanuel, who I'd come to know, he, Victor Emanuel, was a friend of Armand Yramategui. And Armand had been tragically killed, and which is why they ended up naming Armand Bayou after him. But Vic had gotten a hold of some Armand's notes about him going to see this ivory-bill woodpecker up on the Neches River, where the, where the Angelina River and the Neches River flow together into what's now Dam B Reservoir. They call it Steinhagen Lake, but at the time it was known as Dam B Reservoir.

**Fred Collins** [01:13:19] And so we went to that place and it's an incredible virgin forest. And I'd never seen, to this day, I've never seen another thing like that. And we wandered around in that area of several hundred acres, it and some adjoining land back up to the North. And I'm not sure exactly how far that goes, but from what I found out later, apparently it's, it's over 1000 acres, it's like 2000 acres, and the adjacent land is pretty, pretty heavily timbered as well. So it's certainly an area that's big enough to have formed a nucleus for a pair of ivory-bill woodpeckers.

**Fred Collins** [01:14:09] But anyway, we went into that place and the trees were just astounding. There were shagbark hickories that were well over 100 feet tall, and they had diameter breast-high, up to five feet. And there were big black gums that were almost that big. And there was one cypress tree that at the water level it was 15 feet at the base. It was a huge tree - bigger than the 2500 year old tree that was at the Sternberg Tract.

**Fred Collins** [01:14:48] And that tree was, that cypress tree was, was really amazing. It had some holes up in the top of it that looked like they could have been caused by ivory-bills - they were squarish holes and they were big. And then it had a bunch of small holes, a whole bunch of them up in the top of the thing that was dead. The top of this tree had been knocked out. And, but it was still, that top that was gone - it started above all the other trees in the forest. It was well over 100 feet up. Just a magnificent place.



**Fred Collins** [01:15:25] And all those small holes reminded me of a tree I'd seen in Mexico the previous summer that had been filled with a colony of green parakeets. And I looked at that tree and I thought, "You know, I can just see our ivory-bills nesting up there and Carolina parakeets. And it was, it was astounding to look and see it, see that.

**Fred Collins** [01:15:46] But there was no question in my mind after I saw that place that there could be ivory-bill woodpeckers nesting in that area and if they could be productive and live there for a long time.

**Fred Collins** [01:16:01] So back to you, your question was? Pardon?

**David Todd** [01:16:09] No, I was just saying, so the habitat, at least a sample of it, a remnant of it, that was, that would qualify for, I guess, fine ivory-billed woodpecker habitat was, was there at Dam B.

**Fred Collins** [01:16:24] Yes. Yes. And that area is still protected, although it got hit by Katrina and Hugo and Rita. And I heard from different people, I haven't been up there since all were, but I heard that the winds were in excess of 100 miles an hour when they passed through there, and all three of those storms passed through there with that type of wind, and that the damage was incredible, and the whole place was a giant treefall. So I don't know if it really exists today or not, what's left of it. But, but those three hurricanes really took, took their toll.

**Fred Collins** [01:17:09] And I have been up to Woodville, to Martin Dies State Park, which is very close to that river or probably adjacent to it. And at least Martin Dies State Park has half or fewer trees than I remember when we camped there when I was a young fellow, with my parents. And there was not half as many trees in that park that there used to be. And in the park when they lost them, they would cut them down and move them. And it's, it's a relatively open park now, and it used to have all these giant trees in it. So I'm sure that, that reservoir, that area, it was, was really bad.

**Fred Collins** [01:17:56] But anyway, so I had these experiences with these, with these incidents, with ivory-bills, visiting the Big Thicket and the Dam B area in, in '68 or '70. And I was taking a technical writing class in 1970, and we had to do a research paper in the class. And I thought, "Well, I'll just do my own on the ivory-bill woodpecker in Texas." And so I did. And I, you know, it was a, it was a required class, and it had, they were writing these technical research papers, so we had to do certain types of things. And so I did all those types of things. I searched the literature and I wrote people and asked them for information and reports. And I interviewed people and read all the stuff that I could and wrote this paper, put my observations in it, what I had learned from others, and I wrote this paper and turned it in and pretty much forgot about.

**Fred Collins** [01:19:20] And, and had, had, had pretty much literally forgotten about that paper. But after I left, Dr. Arnold kept in touch with me. He was well aware of my paper. I do not recall giving him a copy of that paper, but anyway, he was certainly aware of it. I may have given him a copy. I really don't know what I did with that paper.

**Fred Collins** [01:19:49] But, anyway, he would get these reports. He was kind of the ornithologist of Texas, and so people, when they thought they saw an ivory-bill, would often contact him or he'd get a letter or somebody would send him one second-hand. And he, he wasn't in a position to do anything about it. And he would send the reports that seemed

significant to me and I would follow up on them, usually with a phone call or a letter or something, and see if it was anything that I thought was worth chasing down.

**Fred Collins** [01:20:29] And a lot of the reports seemed good, but they also were birds that were not where they would probably ever be again. And I never did go actually chasing any of those birds, but I kind of followed these reports over the years.

**Fred Collins** [01:20:47] And eventually, Cliff Shackelford started getting a lot of those reports, too, and he and I would compare notes from time to time, and talk about different things. And if I had one that seemed especially promising, you know, I would contact him about it and see if he had heard about it. And sometime he had heard about it and followed up on it. Sometimes he hadn't heard about it, and he might go follow up on it. Anyway, we did the best we could of trying to keep up with sightings over the years. And that went all the way into the '90s doing that sort of thing.

**Fred Collins** [01:21:24] But, at any rate, there weren't a lot of reports, but I still felt like that there was a, likely birds over there, and that they were probably occasionally producing young. And so it's very, very likely that birds were produced as late as 1980 or 1990. And since ivory-bill woodpeckers and other birds of that size and nature, they probably have the ability to live between 20 and 40 years. Sometimes, no doubt, you know, the average bird doesn't live near as long as its potential, but a lot of birds live close to their potential. So an occasional bird in the wild gets to be quite old. And the more we're learning about birds with our new technology, the more we're finding that a lot of birds are a lot older than we think they are.

**Fred Collins** [01:22:28] Of course, this albatross is famous now. I think she's in her 64th year that she's produced a chick. And so some birds live a long time, you know. I raise parrots and have kept parrots a long time. And it's not at all unusual to find a 60 year old Amazon parrot, so an ivory-bill is a similar-sized bird. There's no reason at all to think that they couldn't live to be 40 years old. And so if a bird was, was raised, you know, was hatched in 1980, in 40 years, that's 2020. So who knows, it could be a bird floating around here.

**Fred Collins** [01:23:11] But because of that, when these reports surfaced in 2005, I didn't feel like it was unexpected. I felt like it was over-due. I kept expecting that these birds would show up and somebody would be able to document them. But, you know, the report was kind of an unexpected place. The report in Arkansas in 2005 was at the White River National Wildlife Refuge, and the land managers at the Refuge were very skeptical of these reports because they had worked out there for years, and they didn't see any sign of these woodpeckers. And then some guy on the weekend, you know, finds this woodpecker and they were, they were skeptical.

**Fred Collins** [01:24:04] But when that happened in 2005, and Cornell made that announcement that, you know, the bird still lived. It started making news, and everybody started talking about ivory-bill woodpeckers. The first thing that happened is somebody called me about my 1970 paper. I think it was somebody from Fish and Wildlife. And they started asking me questions about this paper. I said, "Where on earthy did you find that paper?" Oh, it circulates among the ivory-bill people. It was like, "I had no idea." And so here was my 1970 paper floating all over the United States and people from all over the countryside were calling me and asking me questions about it. So, um, anyway, that's, that's actually how I came to have a copy of it, because it's um.

**Fred Collins** [01:25:04] Well, no, I, I don't, well, I guess I had a copy of it in my files. I did have a copy of it, but it was interesting that, that, you know, somebody sent it to me and asked me a question about it. And I thought that was, I just still can't get over that that paper that I wrote for a writing class ended up being out all over the countryside.

**David Todd** [01:25:27] You know, about this same time, did you get a report from a fellow named Darrel Vollert of a possible sighting?

**Fred Collins** [01:25:37] Yes. You know, Darrel is a friend of mine and I had, I helped him get a banding permit and trained him in banding birds. And he's a fine birdwatcher, and he's a birding guide also and he lives up in Chapell Hill, over toward Brenham. And he had gotten a call from an elderly couple that lived on Lake Somerville and a pine, excuse me, oak decline had killed a bunch of post oak trees on their property, and they had all these dead post oaks all over the property. They had about two or three acres. And this bird showed up that they didn't know what it was, and so they called Darrel and they talked to Darrel. And they very accurately described the call, described the birds visually and audibly. They, they very accurately described the call of these birds. But they didn't know what it was and they wanted to know from Darrel what it was.

**Fred Collins** [01:27:00] And so that's one of those sightings that becomes incredibly hard to ignore when somebody describes this bird to you precisely, but they don't know what it is, and they want to know what it is. And then when you finally tell them, well, that's, that's all they wanted to know. Thank you, you know.

**Fred Collins** [01:27:21] And so, you know, looking at their property and looking at the location of their property, there's no, no place close at all for these woodpeckers to live and be there. And so obviously they had to come from somewhere not too far away, but certainly not anywhere near to where these people were. And we looked at Google Earth, and it turns out that the Navasota River bottom is not too far away. And there were between eight and 12,000 really good acres of bottomland hardwood within just a few miles of that location where these birds had been seen.

**Fred Collins** [01:28:12] So that was the likely place that these birds were. And so, Darrel was able to get permission to get on about 4000 acres of property that's owned by a utility over there. And it's very restricted and it was kind of difficult to get in. We couldn't get in real early in the morning, but we got, we got in there about eight o'clock one morning. And we looked over the property and it was extremely good habitat - a lot of large trees, willow oaks, water oaks, overcup oaks, pecan and hickory and green ash and cedar elms. Then some post oaks, a lot of post oaks right above the bottomland. And a lot of these trees were rather large - not, not giant trees like we had by Dam B, but they were large trees and certainly a lot of them were over 100 years old.

**Fred Collins** [01:29:14] And so a couple of times Darrel thought he heard a double knock, and Darrel's got exceedingly good birding ears, and he could hear things extremely well. Bill or I, neither one, heard the double knocks. But we did find a bunch of extensive tree scalings, and it was somewhat similar to what I had observed in that 1968 experience. But, of course, it had been a long time since I've seen that, but I couldn't, I couldn't figure out what to do this sort of bark scaling.

**Fred Collins** [01:30:00] And we documented that. We took a lot of pictures. I wrote a report and sent it to Cornell. And Cornell was extremely encouraged by it all. And they wanted us to

continue the fieldwork and they said they would provide us with cameras and sound equipment. But none of the three of us were in a position where we could do that fieldwork. None of us could. And then also access was difficult. And we were afraid that if word slipped out about it, that people would start trespassing trying to go in there, creating more access problems. And so we were never able to do anything else with that.

**Fred Collins** [01:30:45] But it turns out later that the people at Cornell had found out eventually got that double knock could be the result of gadwall taking off and their wings hit above their backs and make this clapping, make this clapping sound, or this double-knock sound. It's almost like a knock with an echo. And apparently gadwall can do something very similar to the ivory-bill.

**Fred Collins** [01:31:14] And then 15 years afterwards, you know, we discovered that there were porcupine in Harris County. And that was well south of their known distribution by several hundred miles. And so if they were in Harris County 15 years later, they were probably in Navasota ten years ago, and what we were probably seeing was, was damage from the porcupine, which we did not believe were in the area. And so that probably accounted for the tree-scaling, and gadwall probably accounted for the double knock.

**Fred Collins** [01:31:57] But you know, the power of suggestion can lead you to make bad conclusions.

**Fred Collins** [01:32:06] Well, lots of possible red herrings and confusing clues, I guess.

**Fred Collins** [01:32:13] Absolutely, absolutely. But, and it was interesting, all the different things that were learned. And they found, it was David Luno, in fact, one of the guys who was involved in that infamous video that Cornell told the world was an ivory-bill woodpecker. He, he found out that blue jays in Texas and blue jays from Arkansas mimic ivory-bill woodpeckers. And you know, you're going, "How can they do that? If they've never heard one, how is it that they're making these sounds of these, these creatures?" And that's still one that none of us understand.

**Fred Collins** [01:33:07] But anyway, there were a lot of fuzzy videos and a lot of fuzzy photos and a lot of questionable audio recordings that, that, you know, everybody thought was an ivory-bill, but nobody had, nobody ever found a massive nest hole or roost hole where they could actually see these birds going and coming, and get decent photographs of them.

**Fred Collins** [01:33:36] But it was during this time period that I wrote two articles for the Houston Audubon Society website. And one of them I wrote in 2006, and it was, the title of it was, "Ivory-bill Woodpeckers Found in Arkansas: Implications for Texas 2005".

**Fred Collins** [01:33:59] [And David, I need to interrupt us here for a few minutes. I'll call you back.].

**David Todd** [01:34:05] [OK, thank you so much.]