

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Fred Collins

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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Google Voice [00:00:01] This call is now being recorded.

David Todd [00:00:04] Yes. Fred.

Fred Collins [00:00:06] Well, back again.

David Todd [00:00:08] Yes, so glad.

Fred Collins [00:00:08] Sorry about that. Had visitors come in.

David Todd [00:00:15] So you're telling me about the 2006 report and, and how you took some, some sort of speculation about the possibility of what the 2005 discoveries of the woodpecker in Arkansas might mean in Texas.

Fred Collins [00:00:30] And then, and then after that, Tanner was not able to find his own birds. So they, you know, the point is birds can be difficult to find and detect.

Fred Collins [00:00:43] And so the paper goes on to say that regardless of what Tanner thought was or was not in Texas in 1938, and what John Dennis thought was in Texas in 1969, and what I speculated was in Texas in 1970, the question is, "Do we have any woodpeckers in 2005?" And Bill Holliday is a friend of mine that, we'd worked on a paper for mountain plover, him using GIS technology and combining that with my sighting records for the species. And he kind of proved out that he could identify with GSI technology potential habitat for mountain plover, and then he could go and find mountain plover.

Fred Collins [00:01:33] So with that same kind of thing, we looked at, Bill looked at, what possible habitat for ivory-bill woodpeckers was in 2005. And much to our surprise there was a lot more habitat than we had assumed would be large blocks of habitat that could be inhabited by a nomadic type, ivory-bill woodpecker. And, so based on that, we speculated that there could, in fact, be improving habitat in Texas for ivory-bill woodpecker - that there was a lot of potential habitat here.

David Todd [00:02:32] Was that because of ...

Fred Collins [00:02:33] The bottomland forest that had been preserved and what happened was that in 1970 was, was perhaps the low ebb for potential habitat for ivory-bill woodpecker in Texas. And at that point, the Big Thicket National Park got created and some other land, including that, that tract that we had talked up North of Dam B. It was part of a National Forest and it was, it was technically scheduled to be harvested at some point in time, and it

was able to be designated as a scientific study area and it would not ever be harvested. And so that was, that area became preserved. And some other tracts got preserved by various other land trust organizations.

Fred Collins [00:03:32] And at the same time, you know, that was in, that was, a lot of that stuff happened about 1970, and between 1970 and 1980. And here we are 40 years later. And all that habitats, you know, all those trees are 40 years older. So if there was a 50 or 70 year old tree present in 1970, now, and it got preserved, you know, you're starting to have some really old trees. And so the idea is that there's a potential for improving habitat.

Fred Collins [00:04:11] Tanner had made a recommendation on how to preserve the Singer Tract with using a combination of preserved areas and rotation harvesting. And the Forest Service has adapted something similar to that for a lot of its National Forest areas. And so the point is, is that we actually could have improving habitat for ivory-bill woodpeckers in 2005 compared to what things looked like in 1970. And so that was kind of the idea.

Fred Collins [00:04:51] And the Arkansas bird, the habitat in Arkansas was not what I would have considered ivory-bill woodpecker habitat. And so the idea is that maybe there's some woodpeckers being produced in areas in Texas and Louisiana that were dispersing and they had found this improving area in Arkansas where they had spent some time and were detected. And so that was kind of the, that was kind of the idea. And the fact of the matter was that if the birds were in that tract in Louisiana in 2005, it may well have come from Texas.

Fred Collins [00:05:33] So that was that was the point of 2005 article.

Fred Collins [00:05:36] And then in 2007 I wrote another article and it was speculation about what a potential population of ivory-bills could, could reside in Texas now. And refining the information that Bill Holliday worked on initially, we started trying to come up with what we felt was our core area that might support a pair that could use some dispersed chunks of habitat along the same river corridors or something like that, being pretty conservative with the space requirements for the birds.

Fred Collins [00:06:31] But based on the amount of bottomland hardwood that still existed, we came up with a pretty astounding totals. But, for instance, in 1967, John Dennis estimated that there were between two and 12 pair in Texas. In 1970, when I did my paper, I concluded that there could be five pair and maybe as many as 10 pair in Texas.

Fred Collins [00:07:04] And, you know, if they could get through that small bottleneck and still be present in 2005, well, you know, they might be, could be a lot of woodpeckers. And based on the amount of habitat we have, we thought that it was possible that there could be between 110 and 143 pairs of ivory-bills could exist in Texas.

Fred Collins [00:07:34] So, so based on that information, and then started looking at something else. Some of the birds that have a very low reproductive rate but are long-lived - compared to the bald eagle population. Bald eagle population in 1970 in Texas was thought to be 12 pair. And in 2006, it was 100 pair. An eightfold increase. Today, it's over a thousand. So the natural population at Arkansas of whooping cranes went from 56 in 1970 to approximately 220 in 2006.

Fred Collins [00:08:30] So, if the ivory-bill had, you know, five or ten pair, then very likely, we ought to be looking at somewhere between 20 and 40 pair in 2007. And if there were that

many of those birds and they were reproducing and expanding, well, it was just a matter of time before somebody was able to get a good documented record of these birds. And so I felt like that that was what was likely to happen.

Fred Collins [00:09:12] But, you know, with everybody in the world carrying digital cameras now and cell phones and whatnot. I took a picture of two wood storks flying over my house last night with my cell phone. And you can identify the storks no problem at all with my cell phone. So with all, with the world carrying around these digital phones and camcorders and all sorts of other stuff, you know, you know, regardless of how wary the species is, somebody is going to get a photograph of it.

Fred Collins [00:09:54] So that was what I felt was going to happen in 2007. But here we are in 2021, and it never happened. Today, there are a thousand bald eagles, pairs of bald eagles in the state, and there may be 500 whooping cranes in the state. And apparently there were not a dozen ivory-bill woodpeckers in 1970. If there were, there would be a lot more of them today.

Fred Collins [00:10:23] So, September the 29th, 2021, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declares the ivory-bill woodpecker and 22 other species extinct. And it was national news. And they pointed out that despite extensive, well-funded searches across Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, a quest that began in 2005, failed to produce a single documented occurrence of a single bird. And with almost every aspect of life being caught on video nowadays, it, it seems impossible.

Fred Collins [00:11:08] But for me, it's really hard to comprehend how and why the birds didn't make it to the bottleneck of that low populations. Consider how many species of similar circumstances have. How could the ivory-bill and the Eskimo curlew not have recovered? It's just a real quandary to me.

Fred Collins [00:11:28] But now that the federal government has just declared them extinct, now, I guess it's safe for them to show themselves and multiply. But I still have hope that they will live long and prosper.

David Todd [00:11:45] You know, it's interesting to me that how little we maybe know about the habitat and the creatures that are out there, despite all the study and the witnesses and observers. It still seems to be very mysterious, as you say, that, that a bird would, would live long and prosper while others might become extinct.

David Todd [00:12:19] What do you take away from that kind of, I don't know, I guess just the mystery of it all?

David Todd [00:12:27] Yes, it is, it is a quandary. And, you know, perhaps extinction is forever, or perhaps it's not. We have such a short-sighted view of things. You know, we're getting ready to put this new telescope in space and we're going to look back 14 billion years into the beginning of our universe. And, you know, we have all this marvelous technology that we're doing, all sorts of incredible things with, but yet, you know, we know so little about where we live today. The amount of our, the lack of understanding that we have about the Earth and its operations and environments. And people always think they're so smart. You know, they know that, you know, we're doing this. Global warming has happened before because of this and that and the other. We're not that smart. And it really troubles me.

Fred Collins [00:13:42] When I first started being a biologist, of course, I was, and still am, very intrigued about what, what this place looked like when the first people recorded it. But it turns out that that's a false picture. It turns out that what this place was meant to be, so to speak, was what it looked like before people came to North America. The plants and animals here involved with the absence of any hominid ancestor. So North America is a true Garden of Eden. And, we're just beginning to see this, we're just beginning to see the surface of that. North America had six elephants that lived in North America, more than Africa. Our fauna - the big mammals were far superior and more diverse and more amazing than those that are in Africa today. And so that's what North America was. And the birds fit into that environment.

[00:15:04] And we know so little about that. And, and yet we think we're so doggone smart and we know all the answers of this and that and the other. But, you know, we've got lots to learn.

Fred Collins [00:15:21] And I hope that, you know, and I see it every day. One of the things that I enjoy so much about doing what I'm doing is because you see people see something and want to know about it and they become inspired and curious about watching what's around them. And that's all, I've always noticed what's around me and I've always wanted to know what that was, and I think it's a, it's an important thing for people to do, because if you don't know what's around you, and you don't realize how it fits together, you just don't have any, you don't, you're just taking up space and occupying resources and causing trouble.

Fred Collins [00:16:06] And so, you know, it's so important to me that people have an appreciation for life and appreciate what we, what we see. We're here for a brief blink of time and then we're gone. And this is a wonderful place and it's changing. The environment changes. You know, right now it happens to be changing because of humans. And that's been going on for longer than we think.

Fred Collins [00:16:36] You know, we thought the Native Americans were in such equilibrium and got along with the environment so much. They changed it just as much as we, we are, if not more so. They probably changed it more. They will probably more environmentally damaging than we are. It's hard to believe that that's possible. But if you look at the, if you look at the geologic record and look at the number of things that have gone extinct, you have to wonder about that.

Fred Collins [00:17:03] So unfortunately, that's what humans do, they carry things from one place to another and they cause animals that they utilize or don't utilize, depending on the circumstance, to go extinct. And it's going to keep happening, and we just, we should, we should learn to be a little bit more careful with what we do on a day-to-day basis - have as little impact as we can afford to have, but appreciate too, that the world is going to change whether we like it or not. And we better appreciate what we see and what we get. So that's what I hope people, people take out of that.

Fred Collins [00:17:48] We lost a great, magnificent bird in the ivory-bill woodpecker. Because of Audubon and other people who drew wonderful pictures of that bird. And because of Tanner and those great videos and pictures that he took, we have, we have some idea of what we lost. If you haven't looked at the pictures of the imperial ivory-bill, they have wonderful movies of the imperial ivory-bill flying around that are color. They're, what a spectacular bird! And to me, it's almost like, you know, if we had video of mastodons going across the prairie, well, when you see those videos of the imperial ivory-bill, it's just...

Fred Collins [00:18:39] Well, "Jurassic Park" is one of my favorite movies, and the reason it is, is because of that one scene when that guy looks out across that vista and seeing all those dinosaurs walking in front of him, and he says, "They move in herds." And it's, that, that just blows me away, that one scene, you know, 15-second clip, says it all to me. What we, what we can't, what we have not seen, what we no longer have. And so I love "Jurassic Park" for that one scene.

Fred Collins [00:19:25] They're trying to remake a mastodon. To heck with a mastodon. I don't know why they don't remake a ivory-bill woodpecker. It would be a whole lot easier. They got much better DNA. So I'm all for rebuilding our ivory-bill woodpecker.

David Todd [00:19:42] Well, as you said, "Maybe extinction is forever, maybe it's not."

David Todd [00:19:48] Well, I really appreciate your time today and your memories and our insights and your passion, your curiosity. Thank you so much. Well, I guess I'll let you go. I know you've had visitors and guests there that probably want your advice as much as I do, so I'll let you do that and.

Fred Collins [00:20:17] Okay, well I appreciate the opportunity to do this also, David. Thank you.

David Todd [00:20:24] You bet. Well, I hope our paths cross soon. Thank you so much.

Fred Collins [00:20:28] Okay. Thank you, David. All right. Bye bye.

David Todd [00:20:31] You take care. Bye now.

Fred Collins [00:20:33] Bye.