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# Inspired by the past

By *Andy Lindstrom*

In chest waders and camouflage life vest, Robin Rodgers searched for the bird of his dreams. For the first time in 60 years, an ivory-billed woodpecker had been spotted in Arkansas' Cache River Wildlife Management Area.

Rodgers, a self-described "clay artist," was commissioned to create a special piece of pottery etched with ivorybills for the Arkansas Nature Conservancy. He was rewarded for the excellence of his work with an invitation this past January to enter the "hot zone" of Arkansas' Big Woods where the allegedly extinct bird had been spotted.

"I was ecstatic," Rodgers said in his Tallahassee workshop. "It (the search for a surviving ivorybill) was ornithology's Holy Grail. And I was going into the area with Gene Sparling, the man responsible for the first sighting."

Rodgers never did see the elusive ivorybill or hear the famous "double knocks" on a tree that signaled its location, but he was satisfied, he said, to walk in the same deep woods this amazing creature shared with hundreds of other wild critters whose images dance around the shoulders of Rodgers' high-fired vases, bowls and jars.

Since 1992, Rodgers has made his living as a ceramic artist and potter. Born and raised in Chattahoochee, with art degrees from the University of Montevallo and Florida State University, he specializes in raku firing – a 16th-century Japanese technique that creates a crackled and iridescent finish on designs he takes from nature. Many of his design elements, such as sculpted appendages and perforated dots, come directly from the thrown pots made by pre-Columbian Indians.

"The big difference is that most of my pottery begins on a potter's wheel," he said. "It's amazing how fine they were able to hand-build pottery from (clay) coils."

Another difference in Rodgers' pieces is that he decorates them with recognizable wildlife – dolphins, turtles, wading birds, alligators, flamingos and, yes, ivory-billed woodpeckers.

"Handles on the Indian effigy pots were very stylized, made to look like any animal," he said. "I try to render specific animals, not only on the handles but also on the lid and face of the bowl. I guess you could say my artist's statement is that I'm inspired by nature and past civilizations to create things."

Rodgers never started out to be any kind of potter, he said. In school, he studied graphic design. As a youngster, he was more interested in hunting squirrels, fishing and collecting arrowheads,



old bottles and pottery along the nearby Apalachicola River.

“My grandfather’s farm was my playground,” he recalled. “We grew up doing outdoor things.”

Eventually, Rodgers took a job as an interpretive guide at the San Luis Archaeological Site in Tallahassee while he continued his advanced studies in ceramics at Florida State. When San Luis officials asked him if he could make copies of some of the Spanish and early Indian pottery they had dug up, he found a way to combine his talents as a potter with his love for Mother Nature.

“I still do replicas for places like San Luis and Fort Toulouse in Alabama,” he said. “But my pottery today is more contempo-

rary, using modern technology to shock the glass into a rainbow of translucent, crackled and iridescent glass finishes.”

Dozens of pots in various stages of preparation line the shelves and fill the tables in Rodgers’ side-yard studio. “A glorified garage,” he said. In a typical year, he might make about 500 of them at prices ranging from \$35 to \$500 for private collectors and galleries throughout Florida and as distant as Washington State, West Virginia and Woodstock, N.Y. His work is on display in such venues as San Luis, Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales, the Mobile Museum of Art and the Huntsville (Ala.) Museum of Art.

“I’ve also been doing art festivals ever since 1992, when I left teaching to become a full-time artist,” he said. “My target audience, probably, is people that appreciate nature. But I’m also accepted in fine-arts shows, as well as in arts-and-crafts and nature shows. I do it for a living, but it’s also a love. If I’ve seen an animal, it’s probably on one of my pots.”

Robin Rodgers lives with his wife and two children in Tallahassee. His phone number is (850) 668-4952. **FW**

*Andy Lindstrom continues to write feature stories for several Tallahassee publications after having retired as a college history and English professor.*



Collectors pay from \$35 to \$500 for Robin Rodgers’ vases, bowls and jars featuring, or shaped in the form of, recognizable wildlife.

# A Walk in the Woods **A 2006 Ivorybill Adventure**

By Robin Rodgers

Shortly after the announcement last April that the once-believed extinct ivory-billed woodpecker was confirmed living in the Cypress and Tupelo swamps of Arkansas, I began receiving messages from friends and fellow bird enthusiasts. I'd been drawing and sculpting the rare and beautifully striking bird on pottery for many years and was ecstatic that it still lived. Then I received a call from the Nature Conservancy.

The Altamonte Springs headquarters asked me to make a special piece of pottery for the Arkansas Chapter in Little Rock. A few weeks later, I completed a jar with etched ivorybills and trees and a sculpted ivorybill lid.

Scott Simon, the Arkansas Nature Conservancy Headquarters director, replied with the ultimate in thank-you notes – an invitation to come to Arkansas for an ivorybill search visit.

One week before my trip to Arkansas, as I collected camouflage clothing, binoculars and other gear I'd need, my son Kyle brought my phone, with a long-distance caller, out to me in my studio.

"Is this Robin Rodgers?" The voice on the other end asked.

I replied that it was.

"Robin, this is Gene Sparling."

I was in shock. On the other end of the line was the man responsible for the first confirmed sighting of the ivorybill in more than 60 years. Having read just about every magazine article, newspaper and several recently published books on ivory-billed woodpeckers, I was talking to *the* man (sort of like getting a call from say, Robert De Niro).

Not only that, but Gene himself would be giving me a tour of Bayou de View, in the Cache River Wildlife Management Area near

Brinkley, Ark. where Gene had first sighted the ivorybill.

Gene and I met in a little area called Cotton Plant (hardly big enough to call a town, and out in the middle of nowhere). With the din of white snow geese flying overhead, we loaded our gear into a canoe and began one of the most exciting river trips I'd ever taken.

As we slowly paddled downstream, Gene, a kind and soft-spoken outdoorsman and nature enthusiast, described his sighting. He pointed out the very tree where he had seen an ivorybill light, and recounted the play-by-play of his and other researchers' sightings up and down the narrow and winding river, through the towering thousand-year-old cypress trees and tupelo swamp.

We listened intently for the distinctive "kent" of the ivorybill, a sound like a child's toy horn, and the now-famous "double knocks," a rapid-fire succession of double raps on a big tree that tells another bird where its companion is located. The swamp echoed with an occasional tail slap of industrious beavers, lonesome cries from wood ducks and the pterydactyl-like rattle of pileated woodpeckers.

Scanning the forest for signs of tree bark scaling, a sure sign of ivorybill work, and potential nest cavities, we continued our trek through the swamp. A sleepy, barred owl in a hollow tree nodded undeterred by the visitors below, while small downy and hairy woodpeckers went about their morning chores. These were but a few hopeful sightings, none of which turned out to be *the* bird, yet I felt the thrill of being in the backyard of one of North America's rarest.

The next day, I returned to Bayou de View, donning chest



Robin Rodgers searches for signs of ivory-billed woodpeckers in Bayou de View, Ark.

waders, a camouflage life vest, a compass and a pair of very nice binoculars (borrowed from my father-in law) to explore the area alone. Recalling past wintry mornings duck hunting with my dad, I slogged across the bayou and amongst the trees and cypress knees in solitary search of the ivorybill.

I made my way across murky channels, cautiously feeling for solid bottom beneath my waders, and back to mushy land. Pausing silently amongst the hovering tupelos and cypress, I watched. And waited. And listened.

Hours passed. Before I knew it, darkness was falling, and it was time to retrace my steps out of the forest swamp. Although the elusive bird would not find me this time, I was satisfied to walk in the big woods of the ivorybill. A beautiful peacefulness settled in me, knowing that this amazing creature had found a way to survive in a small patch of wilderness in the middle of nowhere.