

# Imperial Woodpecker found on 1956 film but not on surveys to film location.

Title The largest woodpecker that ever lived and the closest relative of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker probably went extinct in Mexico in the late 20th century concludes a paper just published in the October 2011 issue of *The Auk*, the scientific journal of the American Ornithologists' Union. It was thought that no photos or film of the two-foot-tall, flamboyantly crested bird existed, until a biologist from the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) tracked down a 16-mm film shot in 1956 by a dentist from Pennsylvania. The footage captures the last ever confirmed sighting of an Imperial Woodpecker. **Original 85-second clip of a female Imperial Woodpecker. For more clips (including image stabilised clips) [click here](#)** The researchers not only restored the film to use it to describe the species' behavior but also to study the habitat of the woodpecker by tracking down the exact filming location during a 2010 expedition to the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains, in Mexico. This 'lost species' survey, was co-funded by The British Birdwatching Fair - Founding Global Sponsor of the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme. Pronatura (BirdLife in Mexico) helped with the expedition logistics. ?It is stunning to look back through time with this film and see the magnificent Imperial Woodpecker moving through its old-growth forest environment, and it is heartbreaking to know that both the bird and the forest are gone,? said Martjan Lammertink, lead author of the paper. In the color film, a female Imperial Woodpecker hitches up and forages on the trunks of large Durango pines. The bird's extraordinary crest of black feathers curves up over her head, shaking as she hitches up the tree and chips at bark with her long, pale bill. As she launches into flight, the bird shows a long pointed tail, long wings, and a powerful, fast flight. The film was shot by William L. Rhein, a dentist and amateur ornithologist from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, who went to Mexico in 1953, 1954, and 1956 specifically to film and record the sounds of the Imperial Woodpecker. He finally succeeded in filming the bird in 1956, shooting the footage hand-held from the back of a mule, while camping in a remote location in the Sierra Madre Occidental in Durango state. No sound recordings were obtained of the species by Rhein or any other recordist. Rhein died in 1999 at age 89. During the 2010 expedition local residents were interviewed about the Imperial Woodpecker and explored a few remaining old-growth forests in areas inaccessible to logging. The survey found no evidence that Imperial Woodpeckers are still alive. Only residents in their late 60s or older remembered it, and no one reported seeing any of the birds after the 1950s. ?Even in the rare remnants of uncut forest, we found evidence of hunting and saw old-growth forests being cut and burned and planted with marijuana and opium poppies,? said Tim Gallagher, a member of the expedition. The entire range of the Imperial Woodpecker lay in the high country of the Sierra Madre Occidental?a rugged mountain range stretching some 900 miles

south from the U.S.-Mexico border and the Transvolcanic mountains of central Mexico. The species largely vanished in the late 1940s and 1950s as logging destroyed their old-growth pine forest habitat. Imperial Woodpeckers were also frequently shot for food, to use in folk remedies, or out of curiosity. One interviewee reported that logging interests in the 1950s actively encouraged the extermination of these birds, saying that they were destructive to valuable timber, and actually supplied poison to smear on the birds' foraging trees. Similar poisoning campaigns had been waged against the Mexican wolves and grizzly bears in these mountains, and both of these subspecies are now gone. [The article in the Auk](#) "Film documentation of the probably extinct Imperial Woodpecker (*Campephilus imperialis*)" by Martjan Lammertink, Tim Gallagher, Ken Rosenberg, John Fitzpatrick, and Eric Liner of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and Jorge Rojas-Tomé of Organización Vida Silvestre and Patricia Escalante of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) analyzes the film and provides details about the 1950s expeditions of William L. Rhein and the 2010 Cornell Lab follow-up expedition.