

Ivory and Wood

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

Most of us, I think, bird abroad for the thrill of the new and the different: manakins, hoopoes, birds of paradises still unlost. But there is a deeper pleasure sometimes in encountering “our” birds or their relatives on new turf. This winter in Guatemala, even while my head was spinning with lifer after exotic lifer, there was a special satisfaction in watching Magnolia Warblers move through tropical trees I could not even begin to identify.

Away-from-home birding also provides rare opportunities to contextualize birds we might be used to thinking of as unique, even peculiar. Verdins somehow make better sense after an afternoon spent watching Eurasian Penduline Tits, and a spring morning on a rocky Mediterranean field makes us wiser by far the next time we see a Horned Lark.

My Guatemalan eye-opener was a Pale-billed Woodpecker, blithely destroying a tree at Tikal, oblivious to the curious and the admiring gathered below. For birders from the north, seeing this species or its congeners in the tropics is always bitter-sweet. For the Pale-billed Woodpecker, which ranges north to southernmost Sonora, is a member of the genus *Campephilus*, like the two great extinct woodpeckers of North America: the Ivory-billed and the Imperial.

Just three human generations ago, I might have sat under a tree in the American southeast or the Mexican northwest watching a different *Campephilus* strike fear into the hearts of bark grubs. But we gave our woodpeckers up, the price we were willing to pay for furniture veneers and ammunition boxes.

Things seem to be different in Guatemala, and the country is taking advantage of its chance to do things right. Inevitably, there are pressures for development and exploitation, but admirably, enviably, there are equally clear voices calling for



Pale-billed Woodpecker. Wood and paint by C. Enrique España, Antigua, Guatemala.

conservation. Careful and concerted efforts are underway to make the country a prime destination for international travelers interested in nature and culture, and there is every sign that the resources this small and beautiful country is so richly blessed with will be preserved for the enjoyment, and the nourishment, of residents and visitors alike.

I took it as the best possible sign that among the generous gifts given me by my new Guatemalan friends was a wood product. Not a sewing machine case, not an ordnance chest, but a miniature bright-eyed woodpecker, made and given not in commemoration of a bird that is gone but in celebration of the birding that is to be.

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