THE BIG THREE

By Jerome Kessler

This is the story of an intensive search for three of the rarest birds on the North American Continent—three birds on the verge of extinction as a result of the wanton destructiveness of mankind. Quests of this nature sometimes entail considerable difficulties both physical and mental; therefore it is hoped that the frequent use of the word "I" will be excused. The search covered a period of from 1933 to 1939. The eventual observation of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, made in the Singer Tract, Madison Parrish, Louisiana, successfully completed the quest.

Three magic names, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, California Condor, Trumpeter Swan! Names of rare birds, sufficient to stir the pulse and imagination of any bird-lover, no matter how jaded ornithologically he might be! For many years I was thrilled by the thought that some day I would be among those few who had observed at least one of these species. My wildest dreams, however, could not forecast the day when with some pride I could say I had seen not one, but all three of them.

Back in the year 1933, in company with Edward J. Reimann, I made a trip in search of the California Condor, but it resulted in a dismal failure. Bad luck, combined with certain adverse circumstances, helped bring this disappointing set-back. In 1937, I was able to use a more reliable means of transportation to the home of the giant Condors. Except for a few days visit to beautiful Rocky Mountain Park, to indulge there in bird study and some mountain climbing, I reached the village of Fillmore, California, without further delays. Fillmore is the town nearest Sespe Creek Canyon, one of the few homes left to the magnificent Condors. Here, through a pre-arranged meeting, I joined a friend who was to be my companion for the duration of nearly the entire trip. Getting provisions for a two or three day encampment, we walked over to the entrance of the Canyon. Here resided a Mr. Payton, who was referred to us as an authority on the Condors. Our consultation with him proved to have valuable consequences, as he gave important information concerning the birds' general location. I gathered that the bird could be seen in about the same vicinity as Reimann and I had explored in our 1933 expedition, several miles distant from Henly's Camp. And so, leaving Mr. Payton, we embarked on a second trip to find the elusive Condor.

We continued on our way, stopping now and then to consume some of the delicious oranges that were so abundant in this irrigated citrous valley. At twilight we prepared camp, ate a meal from the contents of various cans, and crawled into our sleeping bags. In this dry country there was little to fear of rain, which was lucky for us, as we carried no tents in our equipment.

The next morning we started out at dawn and in due time reached the vicinity where we were to look for the Condors. Though we carefully scanned and examined every soaring speck in the skies, they, without exception, turned

out to be the common Turkey Buzzard. Two hours later we still did not see any Condors; that dream bird of an ornithologist was still a dream, not a reality. Apparently this second venture was also to be a disappointing failure.

I had no intentions, however, of giving up this quest so quickly. My companion, but mildly interested in birds, consented to watch our equipment while, unencumbered, I set out to further my chances for an observation of the great bird. Penetrating more deeply into the rugged interior of the Canyon, I walked about five miles along a trail which was obliterated in places by the spring landslides. Still I did not find what I wanted. My hopes would rise as I observed soaring birds high above, but fell rapidly when they turned out to be Vultures. I gave up and started to return. To help lessen the disappointment I observed a White-throated Swift, a Wren-tit, and a Phainopepla—three life listers.

When I had rejoined my companion, we loaded our packs and began the long walk back to Fillmore. A short time later, depressed by this second failure, my eyes glued on the trail, I was startled to see a large shadow flit by right ahead. Looking up to see what caused it, I received one of the greatest ornithological thrills of a lifetime. There a scant fifty yards above were soaring two huge Condors. Fascinated, we watched the great birds, noting their size, and other distinguishing marks. For about twenty minutes we were treated to the rare spectacle of Condors in flight. Finally they disappeared among some crags in a towering cliff.

Fully satisfied at our splendid observations of the magnificent birds, we resumed our journey to Fillmore, in high spirits. At last I had seen the bird I had once dreamed about.

At Fillmore after some delay we left in quest of the Trumpeter Swan. Yellowstone National Park was our destination, for this is one of the few places where Trumpeters can still be seen with a little luck. As an added incentive to our journey, we wished to see—and photograph if possible—that very powerful animal, Ursus horribilis, the Grizzly. Yellowstone is the last stronghold of this once wide ranging bear.

As our course led us near the extensive Mojave Desert, we decided to make a brief stop there. A long hike in this arid region netted nothing but Desert Horned Larks and Western Crows. However we did appreciate the somber beauty of this dry and desolate area of wasteland.

Continuing, we made a stop at Lone Pine. Our object in this was to try and make the summit of Mt. Whitney and to observe the birds that live in high altitudes. This mountain is the highest in the country, and while considered an easy climb to a good mountaineer, it would be a test of endurance for a couple of amateurs, as we were. We had roughly 32 miles to go from Lone Pine to the summit, about 11,000 feet of climb. A road, 14 miles long, leads to an altitude of 8400 feet; from here the trail begins. A jerk of our thumbs had the desired effect, and we rode to the 8400-foot level. Despite its being late in the morning, we decided to begin right away. Being accustomed to higher altitudes, we encountered no difficulties on that score. After several hours of steady climbing,

still going strong, we reached timberline. Our first troubles began here, as large swarms of big mosquitoes attacked us with unmitigated fury. At higher altitudes, snow appeared in large patches, covering the trail; we began to note Pipits here. Eventually we reached an altitude where snow completely blotted out the trail, and we continued on by pure guesswork. Instead of diminishing, the mosquitoes seemed to increase in numbers and size. An odd contrast indeed, snow and mosquitoes! Real estate and resort people of Florida would probably be interested to hear this of rival California.

The soft, deep, slushy snow, overlying huge rocks, made walking extremely difficult and hazardous. It was rapidly getting darker, and there were no camping places available in the vicinity. To keep on climbing under such conditions was certainly unpleasant and risky, so there was no alternative but to give up and turn back. We had started about seven hours too late. After considerable searching and worry we finally managed to pick up the trail, and under the light of stars descended to the 8400-foot level without further incident. The noteworthy bird of this climb was a Townsend's Solitaire.

Resuming our descent the next morning, we accepted a lift to Lone Pine, caught a bus, and eventually reached Yellowstone Park. This Park is our largest and oldest. Its area is larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined. It is one of the world's finest game preserves. Especially, it is a stronghold of the cruelly persecuted Grizzly, and an area where the Trumpeter Swan still builds his nest.

Our entrance into the Park was made by way of West Yellowstone, Montana. At Madison Junction I consulted a ranger, asking him where I could find Trumpeter Swans. While few of the rangers in the Park can be called good bird observers, they all knew about the rare Swans, and this ranger was no exception. He said that he knew the location of a few of the birds but would not tell us. Did he have a reason for this? Yes! My companion had accidentally broken the seal of an automatic pistol he was carrying along with him, and had showed it to the ranger. The pistol had been sealed at the west entrance to the Park. This had naturally created a bad impression. However, by much explaining and apologizing, I convinced him that we were lovers of wild life. Yes, indeed, we were such extreme conservationists that we would have been happy to hear of a death toll among the gunners. We were, in fact, cranks on bird and animal protection, and would much rather see the hunter laid out than the hunted. True enough!

The ranger finally relented and agreed to show us the Swans next morning. A man of his word, he appeared early the next day, and I began a search for the second of the rare three. Eagerly I anticipated the pleasure of observing so famous a bird. The ranger admitted his one weak point was bird identification. He knew his flowers, trees and animals well enough, but not birds. I was of some help by showing him an Audubon's Warbler, which he had always called a Yellow-throated Warbler. I spotted a Western Hermit Thrush, a bird whose sweet singing he greatly admired but whose identity he did not know; a Rocky

Mountain Pine Grosbeak,—and several others. As I was poor in my knowledge of trees and flowers, he would identify such trees as Lodgepole Pine, Engleman Spruce, Aspen, Limber Pine and others. He pointed out several rare flowers. On the slopes of a nearby mountain we made out a large kind of elk. Finally, as he had to conduct a native ramble for some tourists, our ranger friend had to leave us. Before he did so, he gave us directions how to get to the small lake where we would see the Trumpeter Swans.

Thus alone now, we continued through the dense coniferous forest, and soon reached the lake in question. To our great joy, in the center of the lake were two large white birds. Training my binoculars on them, I saw they were indeed Swans. Wishing to get a better look at such rare birds, I slipped off some clothes and cautiously made a silent entry into the water, swimming with a noisless rippleless stroke. I swam until about 30 yards away, when the birds sensed danger, and with loud honks began swimming away. Despite my strenous efforts to catch up, they soon outdistanced me, and I swam back to the shore.

I was perfectly satisfied that they were Trumpeter Swans and nothing else. After our triumph in observing the second of the rare three, we continued on our way through this interesting park. It is truly a game preserve. We saw nearly all the big game found in America, roaming this wonderland: Bison, Elk, Moose, Grizzly, Black Bear, Mule Deer, Prong-horned Antelope, Rocky Mountain Sheep. Among the smaller mammals we saw were Beaver, Mink, the friendly little Chipmunks, Muskrats, Marmots, and others.

Now about the last of that rare three, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the rarest, the most elusive of them all. While I had seen the Condor after two attempts and the Trumpeter after one, I made three tries for the Ivory-bill before succeeding in observing the bird. It was a number of years ago that I first conceived the idea of looking for Ivory-bills. Reading a *Bird-Lore* magazine containing the census, I came upon a report of the Singer Tract, Madison Parrish, Louisiana. This referred to several Ivory-bills, and so the incentive to search for these extremely rare birds was born. At last, having recently arrived in Philadelphia from a camping trip in Morocco and Algeria, I found the opportunity.

In the summer of 1938, I left for the Singer Tract with my pack sack and a one-way bus ticket to New Orleans. At Atlanta I saw my first life lister, a Black Vulture. I made a stop near the Florida line in an attempt to get to Pensacola, to observe the coastal birds of that region, but I gave it up as rides were very hard to get. On my way to New Orleans again I observed a flock of White Ibis flying offshore near Biloxi, Mississippi. These and the Black Vulture were the only new birds listed on the entire trip.

At New Orleans my paid transportation came to an end, so I hastened to the highway leading north to the Singer Tract, 325 miles distant. After many long hours of futile thumb-waving, I was very pleased to see a car stop, but soon very much dismayed to see that my benefactor was in an advanced stage of intoxication. How we reached Baton Rouge with but one minor accident will always remain a mystery. Eventually I reached Tensaw Parrish just below

Madison Parrish. It was here that I first heard words concerning the object of my quest. At St. Joseph, in a grocery store, I asked a clerk if he had ever heard of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. He had, and stated I could learn a lot about the bird by asking for the chief of police at the town hall.

When on a trip of this nature, I have very little use for the police. In the state of Washington some years back, Reimann and I had had the unique but unpleasant experience of having what little money we did have taken by the police. But this time I forgot personal animosity in order to help make the quest a success, and to my joy, this police chief proved to be kind and very helpful. He did all that was possible to aid me in my search. He showed me large maps of the Singer Tract, and referred me to several experts on the bird: Mason Spencer, J. J. Kuhn, Hollis, and others. He called up a warden who patrolled the Singer Tract but who unfortunately was not around. Finally he stated that the best thing to do would be to go to the Chicago Mill Camp and there ride a spur of the Illinois Central right into the heart of the Singer Tract.

I took the police Chief's advice, and next morning I was at the Chicago Mill Camp, awaiting the train's departure for the interior. The spur line carries timber and has a very poor road bed, limiting the train's speed to 10 miles an hour. Once it jumped the track, but I was scarcely aware of it.

The Singer Tract is 100,000 acres in area. I would need plenty of luck to find the birds, and quite naturally the first day resulted in failure. I once thought I saw an Ivory-bill, but it turned out to be a Pileated with a light bill. The second day was also a failure, although the Pileated and other Woodpeckers were common. The third day was the same, a fruitless search in the enervating heat of the semi-tropical jungle. "Jungle" is what they call these woods in Louisiana. The fourth and fifth days brought no success; at last I was getting fed up with the damp sweltering heat, innumerable ticks and mosquitoes.

I then decided to go to Tallulah. I had learned that Tanner, who is an expert on the Ivory-bill, resided there at times. Unfortunately Tanner was reported to be searching for the Ivory-bills in Arkansas, and it was not known when he would be back. Two interesting birds I saw in the vicinity of Tallulah were the bright colored Painted Bunting and the Wood Ibis. Deciding that I had had enough of the South's terrible summer heat, I left for the more salubrious climate of the Rocky Mountain States. And so ended my first search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker—a failure.

In March, 1939, I took advantage of existant circumstances and decided to make another try for Principalis, the Ivory-bill. Granted a successful termination of my quest for the bird, I hoped to observe the great variety of avifauna in the famed lower Rio Grande region. After a monotonous 48 hour bus ride, I reached Franklin Parrish. My destination was some friends who resided in neighboring Madison Parrish. These people claimed to know a great deal about the "lord gods" I was searching for. I was convinced that at least one of them did. He, when shown a picture of the Ivory-bill and one of the Pileated, had

instantly pointed at the former, adding that he really knew the difference between the two, having lived in the region all his life.

Early next morning we began the search. It was but a short walk from the shack to the northern edge of the great Singer Tract. Although several times my spirits leaped, as I would see a giant Woodpecker alight on a tree, my disappointment was keen to find out they were the common Southern Pileated Woodpecker. Eight hours of futile search convinced me this was not going to be my lucky day. A second and third day also resulted in failures.

At last disgusted with the bad luck, I gave up, the miserable defeat rankling in my mind. And so I resumed the journey, hoping to cool off by observing numerous life listers in the vicinity of Harlingen and Brownsville. At Corpus Christi my paid transportation ended. On this bus ride I had seen two nice birds, the Audubon's Caracara and the Grait-tailed Grackle, welcome addition to my list. Walking through Corpus Christi with pack sack, breeches, and high shoes, I was not a little peeved as the townspeople would stare. In making a trip of this nature, one must expect such things. The first month is always the hardest; after that one becomes inured to almost anything.

Eventually I found the right highway leading to Brownsville. I began shaking my thumb at the passing motorists in that well-known manner. An hour went by—two, three, and still no luck. Five hours passed and still I did not move an inch. I was glad those motorists were not mind readers. Weary and disheartened by remaining so long in one place without getting a lift, I began thumbing in both directions. As luck would have it, in a few minutes a car stopped. It was going North. Right then and there I decided I would make a third try for the Ivory-bill. At Rockport, Texas, which was as far as my ride went to, I walked over to the Gulf in order to swim and observe the coastal birds.

I walked out on a piece of land jutting into the sea, flanked with a sandy shore line and some marshes. Here I had quite a run of luck, for I observed Brown Pelicans, a Louisiana Heron, some Royal Terns, all new species for me. Also seen were Willets and other shore birds too distant to identify—Scaups, Coots, Hudsonian Curlews, and some ducks away out at sea.

I resumed my trip, and six days later reached my destination in Madison Parrish. A brief uneventful search in the region of Guy's Shack, and I was convinced that if I was ever going to find this bird, I would have to use different tactics. My best, possibly my only chance would be to get in touch with somebody who knew where the birds had a nest. To search otherwise in the vast Singer Tract for "Principalis" is really like looking for a needle in a dozen haystacks.

And so I went to Tallulah. Here I visited the law office of Mr. Mason Spencer, a discoverer of the rare bird. Disappointment again,—he was away and would not be back in Tallulah for another week. As I was about to seek J. J. Kuhn, another finder of the bird in the Singer Tract, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that James Tanner was in the vicinity. Tanner probably knew more about the Ivory-bill than anyone else, and I knew that if I could get in

touch with him, my chances of seeing the bird would be much greater than ever before. But to find Tanner, in the extensive Singer Tract, was a problem. Fortunately I gathered some important information. I learned that if I could see a Mr. Speaker, a veterinarian, I would find out—probably—where Jim was, as he and Jim are close friends. Speaker had an office in the town, and there I went. Yes, Speaker knew where Tanner was staying in the Singer Tract. He was over at Corkran's Camp, about 12 miles distant, and furthermore he was soon going in that direction and would be glad to give me a ride to the Sharkey Road. Now, it seemed, events were taking a turn for the better.

However, there was one disquieting factor to be reckoned with. I had failed to get the necessary permission to search for "Principalis." Before I had left Philadelphia I had written the Louisiana State Game Commission for a permit to search for the bird. The answer I had received was inimical to my quest; it had stated that, due to the extreme rarity of the bird, it was not to be disturbed in any way whatsoever. To make an observation of the Ivory-bill now amounted to nearly an obsession with me, so I had disregarded the adverse reply.

Arriving at the Sharkey Road, I lost no time hiking towards Corkran's Camp. Two Negroes whom I met working on the road confirmed the fact that Tanner was at the camp. Sharkey Road cuts a wide swath through a dense hardwood forest. Being unpaved, it is almost impossible to drive over after a rain. It also makes walking very hard. The earth turns to a thick, sticky gumbo mud which has a tendency to accumulate on one's shoes. Muck accumulates until each shoe weighs three or four pounds. Then the gumbo drops off and begins to accumulate again.

Swarms of mosquitoes were proving to be a decided nuisance. Eventually, as I had started in the late afternoon, it began to get dark. For the first time I heard the varied hooting of the Barred Owl. Finally night set in, and, coupled with cloudy skies, the visibility became extremely poor. I was sure I had covered the estimated two miles to the camp, but there was no sign of a settlement. Fearing that perhaps I had passed it in the total darkness, I began loudly calling Tanner's name. I was answered by a veritable barrage of Barred Owl hootings. It seemed the whole forest resounded with these pleasant though weird calls.

I continued walking for awhile, but as there was no trace of any human habitation, I began to think that I had passed the camp. Here was a decision: to make camp where I was, or go back and seek shelter near the highway. Though there were reliable reports of wolves, bears, and panthers in these dense woods, it was the threatening sky and the fierce swarms of mosquitoes that made up my mind, and I resolved on the latter idea. After a wearisome hike over the muddy road, I reached the highway. Finding no shelter here, I had no alternative but to sleep on the ground.

The mosquito situation showed but little improvement. They buzzed and bit, till I grew weary slapping at the pests. To make matters worse, it began pouring, soaking all my equipment before I had a chance to gather it up. Never again, I vowed, would I go on any more damn trips. Having all my belongings

packed up, I started searching for some sort of shelter. I was soon rewarded by seeing the dim form of a shack. Under an extended roof, I found haven from the downpour. After what seemed to be an interminable wait, the first welcome glow from the eastern skies announced that dawn would soon be here.

The rain had stopped, but it had left the road a quagmire, and I began trudging my way towards Corkran's Camp. In no other woods have I ever seen so many Pileated Woodpeckers,—in fact, the Singer Tract is the only woods in which I have ever seen any. There were other birds: I observed six Red-shouldered Hawks in the air at the same time, their shrill calls penetrating the sodden air. Both species of Vultures were present in equal numbers. An occasional Snowy Heron flew by.

Finally I came upon a clearing in the forest in which was a pleasant-looking little cottage. Had I walked 200 yards farther the previous night, I would have saved myself a hard eight-mile treck, for here was Corkran's Camp. I knocked at the door of the cottage, and it was answered by a young chap who proved to be Jim Tanner himself. After the usual formal greeting, I asked him point blank if he knew where there were any Ivory-bills, and, if he did, please to show them to me. Yes, he knew where there was a nest, and he would be glad to lead me to the birds, was the encouraging reply. I was very glad he did not ask to see my permit to search for the birds!

After breakfast, Tanner led me along an obscure trail through the dense thicket-infested wilderness. We had covered about a mile or so when suddenly Tanner's hand shot up, signaling silence. Somewhere from the dense maze of woods, brush, and thickets came a peculiar sound, a sound that might have emanated from a small cheap New Year's Eve horn, but no great music ever sounded better to me. It was a sound somewhat similar to that of the call of a Red-breasted Nuthatch but more metallic and much louder—not at all like the Pileated Woodpecker.

Tanner silently pointed at some object on a tree, but I could not see it. Thrilling with keen anticipation, I manouvered in to a better position, and there at last my quest ended, for I was gazing through eight-power binoculars at a splendid specimen of an adult male Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Fascinated, I noted its whitish bill, the contrasting black and white wings, the high red and black head crest. "Principalis" is truly a magnificent and a handsome bird.

Several minutes later a female made known her presence with that odd tin-horn cry and alighted on a tree in which was the nest. This, in a striped dead oak, was a hole about 50 feet high. The young one—there was only one, of undetermined sex—set up a cry and the female bird began feeding it by regurgitation. A little while later we were surprised to see another bird alight on a dead limb near the nest, a second adult—a male Ivory-bill. What ornithologist would not thrill at seeing four of the world's rarest birds at one time? Entranced by this rare spectacle, I feasted my eyes upon them.

Tanner estimates a dozen or so Ivory-bills in the entire Tract. My first record of the bird was made March 29th with the one young nearly ready to leave

the nest. On March 30 we made further observations of the bird. Tanner was constructing a blind on a neighboring tree in order to get some pictures. He worked only when the parent birds were away in order to disturb them as little as possible. The next day I hiked to Tallulah in order to get some film and groceries so that I could observe the birds for several more days.

I believe some information of the birds would be fitting at this time, so I will quote an article from a past issue of the National Geographic Magazine. "This magnificent bird is by far the largest of our Woodpeckers, being from 19 to 21 inches in length and having a wing spread of 30 to 33 inches. It is today one of the rarest birds on the Continent. Possibly the names of all living ornithologists who have seen this bird can be counted on the fingers of two hands. So far as is known its range was confined to the Southern States. Its territory may be described as extending from southern Illinois and eastern North Carolina southward to eastern Texas and southern Florida. It is evidently a bird of the low country. From nearly all this vast domain it has disappeared. We know of a very limited number in Louisiana and there are still some in Florida. Possibly a few may lurk in the larger swamp areas of northeast Texas, in Arkansas and Mississippi. There have been no well substantiated records of their having been seen in these states for a number of years. From 3 to 5 eggs constitute a set and but one brood is raised each year. The eggs are pure china white in color and are so glossy as to appear enameled. The reduction in abundance of the species is due most probably to man, who has shot relentlessly at this species without cause except curiosity and a desire for feathers and beaks."

Although Tanner has searched for Ivory-bills outside the Singer Tract in Louisiana and Arkansas, he has met with no success. On April the second, we visited the birds at the nest for the fourth and last time. Suddenly we heard a loud clamoring. The birds were sounding off their curious tin horn notes, louder and faster than ever. Evidently there was something annoying the princely birds, and soon we saw the cause. A large Cooper's Hawk was perched on a dead limb in close proximity to the nest of the Ivory-bills. When the hawk saw us, it darted off, and both Ivory-bills went after it in hot pursuit.

And so completing my fourth observation of the rare birds, I finally took my leave, completely satisfied. During my stay at the Corkran's Camp, I had come in contact with several of the wardens who patrolled the region, and it was indeed fortunate that they asked no questions of me concerning a permit. Before closing, I might add that, besides the Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, which of course are by far the most interesting birds of the region, there are such species as Wild Turkeys, Anhingas, Snowy Egrets, Prothonotary Warblers, Yellow-throated Warblers, Yellow-crowned Night Herons and others. The Tract is infested with several kinds of ticks, small and large, both extremely annoying pests.