HOPE TAKES FLIGHT; FOR BIRD-WATCHERS, THE GOAL IS ALWAYS IN SIGHT:

Bird-watchers are an interesting bunch. They do it in the rain, the snow and the dark. They do it on hot prairies, foggy islands and alligator-infested marshlands.

I've never understood them until this year, during which highly credentialed bird scientists have been debating -- like lawyers in a courtroom -- alleged sightings of the ivory-billed woodpecker in an Arkansas swamp. What I hadn't realized before is that the hopes of the birdwatchers always soar above the arguments of the scientists. This makes birding a perfectly respectable outdoor religion, one set apart from bird science.

If the sightings are true, then a rare and beautiful creature thought to be extinct is actually alive. This means that humans can feel a little less guilty about their assault on nature, and that the millions of tax dollars being spent on this bird's habitat protection are justified. If the sightings are false, however, they merely makes hope float higher.

The best way to verify the bird's existence would be to capture, sample or kill it to produce physical evidence, something a museum scientist would call a voucher specimen. John James Audubon, the most famous birdman of all time, "collected" such specimens with his gun so that he could stuff and paint them at his convenience.

Modern bird-watching, however, is more about searching than proving. Each of Audubon's disciples has his or her own feathered Holy Grail, their own avian allegory for the human spiritual quest.

Most of us rise from sleep each morning with hope in our hearts. If we're lucky enough to find what we seek, we expand our range to keep hope alive. Bird-watchers do the same, rising to hopefully see something new and different. Many serious birders keep a life list of sightings, one that will never be fully completed, given that more than 10,000 species of birds exist, often in challenging environments.

Such folks will not sit still in front of the bird feeder, waiting for something to happen. Instead, they quest for something beyond the rare painting, fast marathon or high peak -- for the beauty of life itself.

There are, of course, plenty of other, more mundane reasons to go bird-watching. There's the excuse to be outdoors; the camaraderie of friends; the excitement of the chase; the commitment to wildlife conservation; the rationale for buying new equipment; the physiological exercise; and, for just a few, the chance to do bird science, a.k.a. ornithology.

Like every other science, ornithology is about unambiguously confirming a hypothesis. The case of the ivory-billed woodpecker illustrates this hard-line approach. Beyond several sightings by experts, the strongest evidence for the woodpecker's existence is a blurry, brief videotape claiming to show the bird in flight.

Other experts doubt the claim, using evidence associated with the frequency of wing flaps and the proportion of white plumage on the bottom of the wing.

The credentials, experience and motivation of the scientists -- whose papers pro and con have been published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals -- are not the issue. Rather, it's the lack of unambiguous evidence either way. Basically, the jury is still out for bird scientists.
Not so with bird-watchers, who have gone practically delirious with hope, at least when measured by the amount of newsletter ink and Internet traffic regarding the great bird debate. Their ever-hopeful attitude sets a remarkable example for those of us who might otherwise become pessimistic.

From bird hunting comes the tidbit of folk wisdom "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Sightings do nothing for an empty stomach. An ornithological version might read: "A voucher specimen in the museum is worth more than two sightings from the bush."

For bird-watchers, however, the opposite is true. For them, "a bird in the bush is worth two on the birdbath."

This view of life prompts us to search for hope on the wing.