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Notebook

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Robotic Eye on Celebrated Bird

In a bid to learn whether the ivory-billed woodpecker is extinct or merely very rarely seen, a team of scientists has built and deployed a robot video camera that switches on whenever a fast-moving, birdlike object crosses its field of vision in the swamps of Arkansas.

The computerized video robot was installed last fall in the hot and wet Cache River National Wildlife Refuge and has been filling hard disks with footage ever since. The disks are regularly removed and inspected by a team hoping for a glimpse of the celebrated bird.

The computer and cameras, housed in waterproof cases, were designed by professors at Texas A&M University and the University of California at Berkeley. It was Berkeley

professor Kenneth Y. Goldberg who came up with the idea after reading newspaper articles about a possible sighting of the bird in 2004. He and Dezheng Song of Texas A&M built the robot, whose software can distinguish birds from other flying objects such as bats

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and insects and turns on its two digital cameras only when it identifies a bird. The work, which Goldberg described at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is funded by the National Science Foundation and supported by several private organizations and companies.

While the woodpecker watchers have high hopes, they also face major challenges -- including a limited power supply, lack of network connectivity, interpreting a busy sky, and swampy conditions.

If the cameras work well, Song and Goldberg hope to install others in Alaska to observe polar bears, and in Rwanda to watch gorillas.

-- **Marc Kaufman**

Doctors Faulted for Flying

Medical doctors who fly around the globe to attend professional meetings are violating the Hippocratic admonition to "do no harm" by unnecessarily contributing to carbon emissions, global warming and risks to human health, according to two British physicians who have analyzed data on professional travel.

Ian Roberts, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Fiona Godlee, an editor at the British Medical Journal, noted in the Feb. 17 issue that climate change poses a threat to human health through anticipated increases in malnutrition, disease and flooding. "It is ironic," they wrote in an editorial, "that doctors, for whom protecting health is a primary responsibility, contribute to global warming through unnecessary attendances at international conferences."

They quantified that irony by citing a recent study, which calculated that the 17,000 delegates at a European Respiratory Society conference last year in Munich generated 4,000 tons of carbon dioxide from travel alone. Another study found that the 15,000 delegates who flew to the American Thoracic Society meeting in

San Diego this month generated nearly 11,000 tons of carbon dioxide -- about the amount produced in a year by 550 Americans -- or 110,000 people in the African nation of Chad.

Combined with research that has found scant evidence that attendance at such meetings has much impact on the quality of patient care -- and the widely accepted but little-talked-about recognition that most such trips are "free lunches" in which doctors get free trips to nice locales in return for delivering 15-minute talks -- the team suggested that more conferences should be virtual, with video links for far-flung "attendees."

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