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Robotic cameras to locate ivory-billed woodpecker

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SAN FRANCISCO: Computers are now being deployed in the search of an elusive bird, the rare ivory-billed woodpecker.

Two robotic video cameras have been installed in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, deep in the forests of eastern Arkansas, in a bid to gather evidence that the bird is not extinct.

The program to locate the exotic and rare bird has been taken up by natural scientists from Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. The project is funded by the National Science Foundation as part of its plan to create automated observatories that can capture natural behavior in remote settings.

Bird lovers are thrilled at reports that the bird has recently been sighted and scientists hope the robotic cameras can bring in conclusive proof that it is still surviving.

The robotic camera, called Automated Collaborative Observatory for Natural Environments (ACONE), has been developed by Dezhen Song, assistant professor in Texas A&M's department of computer science, and Kenneth Y. Goldberg, professor in University of California-Berkeley's departments of electrical engineering and computer sciences, and industrial engineering and operations research.

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Talking at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco, Goldberg said the idea is that robots can be useful for advancing science.

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The camera records the images captured in hard disks, which are periodically removed by a birdwatcher and associate professor in the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's department of engineering technology, M. David Luneau, who has enlisted fellow birdwatchers to scrutinize the images for a shot of the ivory-billed

woodpecker.

So far, recordings of what sounds like woodpecker's distinctive hammering have been made. There is also a few seconds of jerky video footage, which the scientists claim is the strongest evidence that the bird is still alive. But many experts dismiss the image as that of a pileated woodpecker, which is a common bird.

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The last of the confirmed sightings of the ivory-bills was in 1944 and in 2004 it was reportedly spotted in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge.

Goldberg said the challenge of his team was to develop software that can throw out anything that is not a bird image. The camera is mounted on a power line and aimed toward the sky. It is programmed to detect only "bird flight" movement, filtering out false readings from clouds and other objects.

The system has been running for three months, but the engineers are still fine-tuning the system, which can even be fooled by falling leaves.

Such a camera has also been installed in the Richardson Bay Audubon sanctuary in California.

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