

## Cool in your code

The online property show  
This week: hidden Marylebone

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From The Times

February 19, 2007

## Robot hunts 'the Elvis of extinct birds'

Mark Henderson, Science Editor

The world's first robotic twitcher has been deployed to one of America's most inhospitable swamps to join the search for the holy grail of birdwatching: an iconic woodpecker so rare that it was thought to be extinct for more than half a century.

The ivory-billed woodpecker, sometimes known as the Lord God bird because of its spectacular plumage, had last been spotted in 1944 before a possible sighting of a bird with its markings was reported in the Cache River national wildlife reserve, in Arkansas, in February 2004.

A fleeting image of the bird was then captured on video, and ornithologists recorded its characteristic drumming sounds, prompting Frank Gill, of the Audubon Society, the leading American bird conservation group, to declare its rediscovery to be "kind of like finding Elvis."

However, the ivory bill's survival has been disputed by sceptics, who argue that the bird in the video could be another bird, the pileated woodpecker.

### BACKGROUND

The ideal task for a lazy bird

The continuing controversy has prompted scientists to turn to new robotic technology in an effort to

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**“It's Blow-Up, Jubilee and Clockwork Orange rolled into one”** Lisa Armstrong

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trouble  
Traditional herald of spring is  
in danger of falling silent

that it is very inefficient," said Ken  
Goldberg, of the University of  
California, Berkeley, who led the  
team that designed the robot  
birdwatcher. "You have to go

somewhere remote, sit for long periods in the cold, it is lonely, costly,  
and it can be downright dangerous. The presence of a researcher can  
also affect the presence of the species you are trying to help.

"Robots can help by watching right through the mosquito season and  
the snake season, if they can be made smart enough to make decisions  
and process data in real time."

His colleague, Dezheng Song, of Texas A&M University, said: "Usually  
people do this type of bird watching in the winter because there are  
fewer leaves, making it easier to spot the woodpecker. Also, in the  
summer, the temperature is hot, it's swampy, and there are mosquitoes  
and snakes to deal with. Our [robotic] system can run the whole year,  
and it is not bothered by mosquitoes."

The robot is a sophisticated pair of smart video cameras, which point  
skyward, east and west, in the Big Woods region of Arkansas where it  
is hoped that the ivory bill survives. The cameras have software that  
activates only when the view overhead changes in a way that might be  
consistent with a bird in flight.

The system is designed to filter out false positives from clouds, water  
reflections and falling leaves. "The program knows, for example, that  
the ivory-billed woodpecker flies 20 to 40 miles per hour, so anything  
outside that range is deleted," Dr Song said.

Each camera records eleven frames per second, each with a resolution  
of two megapixels, so any image should be sharp enough to allow  
scientists to make a conclusive identification should an ivory bill fly  
overhead. While the elusive woodpecker has yet to be seen, the cameras  
have already picked up several good images of other birds — a  
redtailed hawk, a flock of Canada geese, and a blue heron — which  
were shown yesterday for the first time at the American Association for  
the Advancement of Science meeting in San Francisco.

Ron Rohrbaugh, of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, a member of the  
scientific team searching for the woodpecker, said that the robot was a  
valuable asset. "There are other ways of searching for the ivory-billed  
woodpecker, but those ways usually involve a human positioned in the  
forest for a very long time," he said.

"Remote systems that can serve as our eyes and ears are a big  
advantage."

### Mousetrap weblog

Comment, links and latest titbits  
from the world of technology

#### COMMENT:



“ There is something  
depressing beyond belief  
about a scientist who  
refuses to recant in the face  
of overwhelming opposing  
evidence ” [More..](#)

Anjana Ahuja

Post a comment

#### ECO-WORRIER WEBLOG



### Eco-Worrier Weblog

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living with Anna Shepard of The  
Times

#### HEALTH



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Keep up to date on the latest

## HAVE YOUR SAY

health developments

The debate over the supposed extinction of this bird has been going on for over 50 years with the "experts" on one side and locals from Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana reporting occasional sightings. Growing up near the Big Thicket area of east Texas, I saw pileated woodpeckers almost daily - but no one was willing to believe a reported sighting of a similar but distinctively different species. The "experts" knew better. I'm hoping a few of these experts will soon be eating crow.

Roger Hebert, Austin, Texas

I am amazed, I love to see technology used so positively. However I am a bit perplexed at one of the people who commented.

"The story would be enhanced with an image of the Lord God." I haven't ever seen a picture of God in my life, as there are none. Cameras were not around in Jesus's time, and i know he certainly didn't pose for any artists in his time.

So why would that even be relevant to the article?

Kurt D Iobst, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

Why would I be interested in the comments/opinions of people who lack basic spelling and grammar skills? Read the story, reflect on what it says, and then... do not write a comment!

As for the story: work like this is what makes me feel good to be human. This is exactly what we should be doing with our money and time, not inventing new and "better" cell phone technology, or (like the Japs) making robots that dance and sing or greet us at the doors to museums. A robot that finds rare animals? Excellent. A robot that cleans my house? Pathetic.

George Hayduke, New Prospect,

Hope the adventure is successful. Its nice to see stories of life when the headlines show so much carnage. The story would be enhanced with an image of the Lord God.

Rohan Bell, Kingston, Jamaica

All the above stated problems, of recording a rare bird, also apply to the elusive Bigfoot of course. Which is often overlooked by sceptics and scientists alike, as they dismiss Bigfoots existence, as,, Naah! Couldn't be!.

Michael Bird, Birmingham, England

isnt tecnology wonderful,

With all the terrable things going on in the world, its nice to know there are people out there that care enough to make a differance. Just fantastic.

andrew bailey, newcastle upon tyne, tyne and wear

 VIDEO

ah think the wwoods pecker is losey goosey

Franklin St. Pierre, Dracula, MO,

Huh huh wood pecker huh huh.

Bill Tomson, Brownville, USA/CA

**HAVE YOUR SAY**

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2005/54  
£25,750  
SE England

**Mercedes-Benz SLK55**

**AMG**  
2006/06  
£51,950  
NW England

**Volkswagen Touareg**

**Altitude 5.0 TDi**  
2005  
£42,999

**Ferrari F430 F1**

2005/05  
£139,950  
The Midlands

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**Managing Director**

£six figure salary  
Veredus Executive  
Resourcing  
London

**Executive PA to CEO**

£35k + benefits  
LMA Recruitment  
London

**Commercial Lawyer**

£ n/a  
Garfield Robbins  
International  
South East

**Graduate Sales**

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IBM

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