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TIMES ONLINE



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

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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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Tech and Web

Latest technology news from our reporters

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."

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from the world of technology

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“ There is something
depressing beyond belief
about a scientist who
refuses to recant in the face
of overwhelming opposing
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Anjana Ahuja

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Eco-Worrier Weblog

Share your top tips on green
living with Anna Shepard of The
Times

HEALTH



Health News

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

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2006/06
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Robot hunts 'the Elvis of extinct birds'
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POA

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