



## WIRED SCIENCE

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Monday, 19 February 2007

**AAAS: Big Brother for Birds**

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Here at Wired, we celebrate geeks: videogame geeks, comic book geeks, scifi geeks, we love 'em all (heck, we *are* them). And then there are bird watchers. Maybe it's because birding is a pretty low-tech pastime. Or maybe it's because we're based in city where a rare bird is a pigeon with two feet and all it's feathers. But I for one don't get it.

Evidently though, if you are into birds, the ivory-billed woodpecker is like Action Comics #1. It hasn't been seen for sure since the 1940s and is believed by many to be extinct. Enter a [computer vision system](#) that can detect when (if?) the bird flies into it's field of view and start recording automatically.

See, it's not enough to simply point a camera at the sky and hope for the best; all that footage would eat up a ton of memory and most of it would be useless. So researchers mounted two hi-res video cameras on an electric pole in an Arkansas bayou. A computer processes the image data in real time, and algorithms filter out false readings from clouds, falling leaves, etc (i.e. anything that doesn't look and move like an ivory-billed woodpecker).

The advantages are obvious: "Humans are expensive, they're not always alert, and their simple presence is a disturbance to the environment," says one of the researchers. Still, the tech is bound to ruffle some feathers in the birding community.

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