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**Ideal remote camera for locating Ivory-bills is just an idea**

**This year, most searches will rely on experts and helicopters**

by Matt Mendenhall, Associate Editor

October 26, 2007 - Will an unmanned camera attached to a tree deep in a forest capture proof that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker lives? Maybe. The list of rare animals either rediscovered or recorded in the wild by camera traps includes a type of mongoose in Tanzania, the Chinese mountain cat, a rhino on Borneo, the world's rarest rabbit on Sumatra, and the large-antlered muntjac, a deer from Southeast Asia. Closer to home, a mountain lion photographed in Minnesota in August forced wildlife officials to reconsider their dismissal of previous reports of wild lions in the state.

In the [accompanying article](#), Geoffrey Hill, Auburn University ornithologist and leader of the Ivory-bill search in the Florida Panhandle, calls for the use of remote cameras with lenses that are long enough so "they could be placed far back from a cavity or feeding tree and not encroach on the birds."

The camera he has in mind, he says, doesn't exist yet. The most advanced remote camera dedicated to the Ivory-bill search has been in place for a year. Computer scientists and engineers from the universities of Texas A&M and California-Berkeley installed a [robotic video camera](#) in Arkansas. They call it ACONE, which is short for Automated Collaborative Observatory for Natural Environments. Set up on a powerline pole in the Bayou Deview swamp, it is programmed to capture images of flying birds. It has taken color videos of geese, raptors, Great Blue Herons, Pileated Woodpeckers, a Northern Flicker, swallows, and other birds.

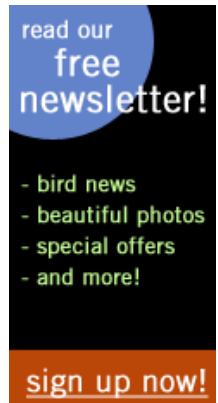
"The ACONE is the sort of camera I'm thinking of, although that particular camera is not portable enough," Hill says. "The images I've seen from that camera are outstanding. I think that someone good with electronic equipment could put a digital SLR in a waterproof box, program it to take an image every three seconds, and dump all the photos into a hard drive."



A Great Blue Heron flies over the Bayou Deview in Arkansas. A robotic camera known as ACONE, which is programmed to photograph flying birds, captured the image. The camera's developers hope it will take a photo of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. [Photo courtesy Texas A&M University.] [\[larger image\]](#)

Jerome Jackson, woodpecker expert and author of the book *In Search of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker* (Smithsonian Books, 2004), says remote cameras might help locate the species, but he questions whether the quality of an image would stand up to scientific scrutiny. "Having a photographer behind the camera who can home in on the bird and get the focus and composition perfect is obviously much better," he says. "The truth is that because of the quality and ease of photo editing today, single images or poor-quality images alone would not likely be acceptable documentation of the birds. The best evidence would probably be several minutes of high-quality video."

He also contends that the belief that Ivory-bills are



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A Red-tailed Hawk flies below powerlines in this image taken by the ACONE camera. [Photo courtesy Texas A&M University.] [\[larger image\]](#)

easily spooked by search parties is unproven. "These are not birds that have ever been so secretive," he says, "and I find it unreasonable to suggest that they have become so secretive that they cannot be seen and photographed as other birds are."

Laurie Fenwood, Ivory-bill recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, says she's interested in the idea of setting up more advanced camera traps, but the agency does not plan to invest in the equipment this year. "We wouldn't rule it out," she says.

For now, the plan this winter is to rely on small groups of experienced birders and aerial searches by helicopter. If Congress approves the \$1.2 million in requested funds for this year's search, helicopters will fly over parts of Arkansas and North Carolina, and possibly Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas in hopes of spotting an Ivory-bill.

"We don't have the 8x10 glossy photo that everyone wants, but we've accumulated enough evidence that we cannot ignore," Fenwood says.

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