Robotic Cameras Join Search for Elusive Woodpecker

By REUTERS
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REUTERS

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - Deep in the bayous of eastern Arkansas, two robotic video cameras keep vigil for an elusive bird, aiming to capture conclusive evidence the ivory-billed woodpecker is not, as long feared, extinct.

Recent sightings have revived hope of the survival of the large and dramatically marked bird, with its characteristic white beak and red crest.

Now the search is on for proof -- something scientists hope the robot video cameras can provide.

The cameras are part of a new project funded by the National Science Foundation to create automated observatories that can capture natural behavior in remote settings.

``Our idea is that robots can be useful for advancing science,'' said University of California Berkeley professor Ken Goldberg, speaking at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco.

Goldberg and a colleague at Texas A&M University have joined forces with researchers at the Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University to look for the bird in the Cache River Refuges of Arkansas, where a kayaker reported spotting it in 2004.

Recordings of what sounds like its distinctive hammering have also been made.

Before that, there had been no confirmed sightings of ivory-bills for half a century.

A few seconds of jerky video footage is the strongest evidence the bird is still alive, but some experts who have seen it say it could be showing a pileated woodpecker -- a similar-looking bird that is fairly common.

Standing nearly 20 inches tall with a wingspan of about 30 inches, the ivory-bill was thought to be the largest woodpecker in North America.

``The challenge is to develop software that can ... throw out anything that is not a bird image,'' Goldberg said.

Mounted on a power line and aimed toward the sky, the cameras are programmed to detect only ``bird flight'' movement, filtering out false readings from clouds and other objects.

``It still has a fairly high false positive rate,'' Goldberg said. ``We get triggered by leaves blowing by,'' Goldberg said.

The cameras -- one pointing east and one pointing west -- are connected to a computer that processes the data. They shoot 22 frames per second with about two to three

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megapixels per frame, but keep only a tiny fraction of what they shoot.

Waterproof gear helps protect the equipment from rain and wind. To safeguard it from hunters in rowboats taking target practice, Goldberg considered bulletproofing, but settled instead on a sign warning of radioactive material.

``That seems to have worked,'' he said.

The system has been running for three months and so far has captured a flock of geese and an blue heron.

``It's a work in progress. We'll keep watching,'' he said.

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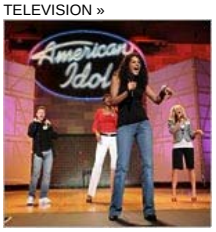

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