

The secret life along the Appalachian Trail



Motion-triggered cameras captured candid images of wildlife.

BASIC

How can you take a close-up photo of a wild deer? One way is to go into the woods and wait very quietly for a very long time. But a better way is to set up a camera to work on its own. That's what scientists did along the Appalachian Trail, in the eastern U.S. The cameras were motion-triggered, meaning they took pictures whenever something in front of them moved. Most of the pictures were of one of the types of animals shown here. **Can you guess which?** (*The white-tailed deer.*)

What do you think this deer thinks

of the strange camera? But the cameras also captured less common animals, like black bears, bobcats, and flying squirrels. Scientists now have almost 2,000 photos showing the wildlife along hundreds of miles of the trail. **What do you think they can learn by looking at these photos? What do you think a motion-triggered camera would photograph in your back yard?** NEXT

GENERAL

If you want close-up photos of wild animals, you could go into the woods with a camera and sit very quietly and wait. Or you could do what a group of scientists from the Smithsonian Institution did. They set up 50 motion-triggered cameras in the woods along the Appalachian Trail, in the eastern United States. To attract animals to the cameras, they used a stick dipped in a smelly mixture of animal urine they called "the stink." From April through October, volunteers went to the trail to collect the photos and move the cameras to new locations. **Why do you think they moved the cameras?** When the experiment ended, they had almost 2,000 photos of wild animals along the trail. It's no surprise that the most photographed animal was the white-tailed

deer, a very common animal in that part of the country. **Do you have white-tailed deer where you live?** But the camera also captured many black bears, sometimes playfully attacking the camera. Some photos showed nothing but dark fur — the bear's backside as it used the camera as a scratching post. Several bobcats, which are rarely ever seen by humans, were photographed. One camera caught a horse, part of a herd of wild ponies in the area. Scientists had hoped they might get a picture of the Eastern cougar, but they didn't. The animal is now thought to be extinct. But the camera did catch a picture of a very common animal — a human hiker, photographing the camera as it photographed him. **What do you think scientists can learn by looking at the wildlife in these photos?** NEXT

ADVANCED

Last spring, scientists for the Smithsonian Institution undertook a project to capture candid images of wildlife along the Appalachian Trail in the eastern United States. They installed 50 motion-triggered cameras along a 600-mile stretch of the trail in Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland. The cameras were set back from the path so that hikers wouldn't set them off. To attract animals to the area, scientists used sticks dipped in a malodorous mixture of animal secretions they called "the stink." Each month, volunteers went into the woods to get the digital photos and move the cameras to new locations. By the end of the project in October, they had nearly 2,000 photos, documenting wildlife along the trail. **What do you think were the most commonly photographed animals?** (*white-tailed deer*)

But scientists were surprised at the large number of black bears that showed up. The cameras managed to capture the essence of the bears' personalities on film — one series shows an attacking bear coming at the camera, followed by a photo of the ground. Another picture shows nothing but a dark, hairy mass — the backside of a bear using the camera as a scratching post.

Other animals captured by the cameras include coyotes, flying squirrels, raccoons, and the common but rarely seen bobcat. One shot caught a horse, part of a colony of feral ponies. Scientists had hoped they might see an Eastern cougar, once native to the area, but now thought to be extinct. But none were seen. **What do you think can be learned from a project like this one?** NEXT