

Export Company's Webcams follow Black Bear, Cub

May 16, 2010

When Bill Powers set up a camera to record the movements of deer and raccoons in his Murrysville backyard in 2004, he never imagined that his work would someday have a worldwide following of nearly 1 million viewers. But a female bear in Minnesota changed all that.

For months, Powers' motion-activated cameras have been streaming live video on the Internet of Lily, a 3-year-old black bear who dened in Ely, Minn., and her cub, Hope, whose Jan. 22 birth was captured by Powers' Export-based company, PixController Wildlife Webcam. Nearly 97,000 people from around the world are following the daily activities of Lily and Hope on the Internet social networking site Facebook. Fans even selected the cub's name shortly after her birth. Powers is president and CEO of PixController Inc., a company that has grown since the early days when he ran it from his basement. It's now in an office with five employees at Murry Corporate Park in Export.

"I've always been into technology and into wildlife in general," Powers said. "The whole thing just fell into place."

His work with the History Channel program "MonsterQuest" led to the birth of the wildly popular "bearcam."

"This winter we were contacted by the producer of 'MonsterQuest,'" Powers said. "They wanted to put a live webcam into a bear den. We jumped on that immediately."

The video was something Doug Hajicek, producer of "MonsterQuest," wanted desperately.

"No one had ever filmed a wild black bear giving birth," Hajicek said. "It was tried by many a filmmaker in many a decade, but it never happened. We're trying to get people thinking about what bears really are. They're not this vicious, mean animal people think of. We wanted to show the world how bears care for their young."

After a den was located, along with a nearby residential garage for a power source, Lily was almost ready for her close-up. With the pregnant bear inside the den, Hajicek and a technician installed 500 feet of cable from the den to the garage to broadcast the video. Lily grew weary of their presence and left the den, but later returned, Powers said.

"The day it (the video feed) went up ... it just went berserk at that point," Powers said. "It was the first time anybody had actually seen a bear den. When she was in the labor process it was kind of tough to watch her, because she was in a lot of pain. When the bear cub was born, it was kind of neat. That's when we started to use a lot of the social tools like Facebook and those kind of things to get the word out quick, and it just went viral at that point."

Powers has been recognized for the window to wildlife his equipment provides. The webcam he first set up in the woods behind his house was selected as one of Most Interesting Webcams for 2007 by [EarthCam](#), a webcam network based in Hackensack, N.J. Technology has improved tremendously since Powers began in 2004.

"We took our main camera and upgraded it from still images that we refresh to a streaming video with sound. We're able to broadcast a multitude of different kinds of wildlife," he said. "We see quite a lot of wildlife and interesting things within the Murrysville area."

Powers' cameras also have been trained on two Peregrine falcon nest sites in Pittsburgh -- one on the Gulf Tower and another on the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning.

"One of the things we've seen is that these birds are far more active at night than we would have ever imagined," said Todd Katzner, director of conservation and field research, National Aviary. "Because we've got sound, we can hear when they're calling, when they're coming and going, mating behavior and probably some agitation. All of that was stuff we probably wouldn't have picked up on our old camera system."

The cameras caught a new female falcon taking over the nest at the Gulf Tower.

"A falcon named Dorothy had been on that nest for 14 years and it was either killed or pushed out by another falcon," Powers said. "(Dorothy) had already laid two eggs, this other falcon came in and laid another egg, and this was all broadcast live."

Lily and Hope are now out of the den they shared, but that doesn't mean their 15 minutes of fame are over.

"The hope is to get a camera in her den that she picks up this year," Power said. "The Lily story is not going to die. If we can get her within range, we're going to follow her. ... It's a way of learning more about wildlife than people have ever been able to learn."

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