

## Web cams gone wild

**Wildlife cameras play peekaboo with nature, streaming the doings of falcons, koalas and ants from around the world to a computer near you.**

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The eggs are laid.

The annual drama has begun.

Across the country, from Karla Scanlon's first-grade Fishtown classroom to a watcher in Wichita, people are revving up their computers to learn what's next for two peregrine falcons nesting on a ledge of a Harrisburg office building.

Will all five eggs hatch? Will the young survive?

The answers will come via cameras perched nearby, feeding photos and video to the Internet. Focused so close you can see the birds breathing, the cameras provide an instant fix for wildlife voyeurs.

By all accounts, their appetites - the watchers', that is - are voracious. And wildlife cams are proliferating.

You can click on to a beachful of elephant seals off the California coast who look cool, even if they're only sunbathing.

You can set your screen to the panda cam at the National Zoo, where nine-month-old Tai Shan might be munching bamboo.

A Web celeb since his debut as a newborn last July, garnering 18 million hits in nine months, the panda gets fan mail from folks around the world, including U.S. soldiers in Iraq.

Whenever he strays from the norm, viewers call the zoo. "He's up in a tree," they wail, worried it's too high for him to get down. "Can you go check?"

[EarthCam](#), a Hackensack, N.J., company that sells equipment and tracks cams, lists 225 in its "animals and pets" category, from penguins and sharks to ants, koalas and polar bears.

A click of a mouse will bring up herons in Washington, elephants in Africa, or fish swimming the Schuylkill's Fairmount fish ladder in Philadelphia.

Nest-box cams are big because cameras can get close and zoom in on babies.

Soon, more than 15,000 bats will return to the cam-rigged attic of a 19th-century church in a state park near Altoona.

The cams show "how small the world can be," said John Gibbons of the National Zoo, which has 18 Web cams, including ones for naked mole-rats, Amazon fish, and an octopus.

Credit technology. Long-distance streaming video has been around since the moon walk in 1969. But now the equipment is cheaper, and more reliable.

Sure, you can pay up to \$50,000 to Alaska's Daniel Zatz, Emmy-winning wildlife filmmaker who owns SeeMore Wildlife Systems and set up the California seal cam. Zatz will chopper into the great beyond and set up a camera and satellite link that delivers live, streaming video with sound, powered by a solar panel/wind generator combo.

But you can also, as the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland did for its osprey and eagle nest cams, settle for still images that refresh every 60 seconds and pay less than \$2,000 for the equipment.

In a way, no paparazzo ever had it easier. Unlike human starlets that flit to snazzy nightclubs, wildlife species can be conveniently predictable.

Each spring, half a million sandhill cranes stop at Nebraska's Platte River Valley, where National Geographic cameras await.



Live, from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, it's falcon cam, real-time egg-hatching drama.

Every August, the start of the dry season at a Botswana reserve, the local wildlife can be counted on to visit a particular watering hole. Nearby, a ranger in a blind adjusts the aim of more National Geographic cameras, often answering viewers' questions in real time.

For better or worse, zoo animals are the most predictable; they have no choice. Many zoos have Web cams, and the Philadelphia Zoo is mulling the idea.

Interest has been overwhelming - sometimes literally.

Blackwater's cams get 2,000 to 3,000 hits a day, although one surge of interest brought its telephone line to its knees. It was replaced with one "the size the Pentagon uses," said volunteer Tom Hook.

In 2003, "falcoholics" stalled the New Jersey government's server when they stormed the virtual gates of the state Department of Environmental Protection's falcon cam in Jersey City for a live Webcast banding.

Two weeks ago, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection reported its own falcon cam jam. The cause? "Roosters" who linger on the site.

Amazed cam operators joke that people must have a lot of free time. Beyond that, they can't figure out why people are so interested, other than that they really love wildlife.

Some places - a falcon ledge, for instance - are inaccessible. "You get a glimpse into something that people would never ordinarily be able to see," said Bill Heinrich, of the nonprofit Peregrine Fund, which works to conserve birds of prey.

Other places - like the Race Rocks islands in British Columbia, north of Washington state - are too environmentally sensitive for hordes of humans, trampling the flora and scaring the fauna. Its cameras provide minimal-impact tourism.

Most cam sites foster conservation and include a strong educational component, with screens full of information and special Web events for schools.

Zatz thinks a lot of people have "skewed" ideas of nature, partly because of edited footage on TV. "Watching nature unfold at its own pace," he said, "is very, very valuable," because it's closer to reality.

Many cams double as research tools. Biologists were so excited by what they saw on the Fairmount fish cam that they set up their own unit nearby to assess fish populations.

Last year, the cam documented the brief foray of a river otter, not seen in the Philadelphia reaches of the river since the 1800s. The creature is notoriously fussy about water quality, so its appearance "really says a lot about the improvement" of the river, said Ed Grusheski of the Fairmount Water Works Interpretive Center, which operates the unit.

Cams even reap funds for wildlife. (Or more cams.) Washington state's Department of Fish and Wildlife, which has eight cams and more in the works, gets a steady trickle of money from a click-on icon.

When one of the New Jersey DEP falcon cameras crashed last year - it was a dramatic season; the male lost a wing - Linn Pierson pleaded for funds in her "Nestbox News" column on the cam site. Within a week, they had enough to buy two.

For whatever reason, falcon cams seem to have proliferated more than others. Perhaps it's because the bird's life story - an endangered species making a comeback - is so compelling. Certainly, the fact that they nest on building ledges, within easy reach of power supplies and phone lines, can only help.

Karla Scanlon's students at Adaire Elementary School will have to be patient a few more weeks before the eggs they've been watching actually hatch. It should happen, oddly enough, near Mother's Day.

Meanwhile, Scanlon will center many lessons on the falcon. She thinks watching it real-time on the Web gives her students a "connection."

Last week, she stood before 18 upturned faces and wrote vocabulary words on the blackboard: predator, talons, habitat.

In small groups, they went to computer monitors at the back of the room and gawked at the Harrisburg falcon on her nest.

"Does anyone know why this is important?" Scanlon asked.

Donald Chandler, 7, raised his hand. "If it dies out," he said, "we'll never get to see it again."

## **A Cam Sampler**

*Note: Sometimes cameras or equipment are out. Also, high-speed Internet connections work best.*

### **Pennsylvania DEP falcon cam:**

[www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/falcon/](http://www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/falcon/)

### **New Jersey DEP falcon cam:**

[www.state.nj.us/dep/fgw/peregrinecam/](http://www.state.nj.us/dep/fgw/peregrinecam/)

### **National Zoo cams:**

<http://nationalzoo.si.edu/animals/webcams/>

### **Eagle cam, Hornby Island, British Columbia:**

[www.infotecbusinesssystems.com/wildlife/](http://www.infotecbusinesssystems.com/wildlife/)

### **Washington state cams**

[www.wdfw.wa.gov/wildwatch/](http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/wildwatch/)

### **Blackwater osprey and eagle cams**

<http://www.friendsofblackwater.org/camcentral.html>

### **Race Rocks**

[www.racerocks.com/](http://www.racerocks.com/)

### **National Geographic:**

[www.ngm.com/wildcamafrica](http://www.ngm.com/wildcamafrica)

[www.ngm.com/cranecam](http://www.ngm.com/cranecam)

### **Elephant seal cam:**

[http://www.parks.ca.gov/video\\_gallery/](http://www.parks.ca.gov/video_gallery/)

(click on video from Ano Nuevo Island)

### **Bat cam:**

<http://www.pennfuture.org/bats/>

### **Fairmount fishcam:**

<http://www.fairmountwaterworks.org/index.php>