

Streaming Snowman

Webcam gives world view of Gaylord backyard

01/11/2007

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GAYLORD — The ground around it may have been practically bare for a while there, but that didn't stop Ken Borton's "snowman webcam" from running away with a top honor for Webcams this year.

Trained on a plywood snowman in Borton's backyard, the folksy webcam was selected as one of the 25 Most Interesting Webcams of 2006 by EarthCam (<http://www.earthcam.com/top25>), a leading Webcam network and authority on the Internet camera industry.

"The whole thing has been sort of a bizarre joke all the way around," said Borton, a vacation rentals specialist and Web site designer whose simple webcam allows viewers to keep track of snowfall in the area by how much of the snowman is visible. "The only thing I can think of is when they did the judging we had two feet of snow up here and (the snowman) had snow up to his waist."

The eighth annual list, announced Dec. 13, was compiled by EarthCam staff and a panel of "VIP" judges from thousands of nominations by Webcam owners, fans and EarthCam producers throughout the year, said EarthCam CEO and founder Brian Cury. Selected for their creativity in concept, technology, visual quality and design, they include cameras in Andorra, Canada, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, Syria and the United States.

Some offer viewers unprecedented glimpses of Bald Eagles, chickens, Beluga whales, a squirrel monkey, Sumatran tigers, Madagascar hissing cockroaches, tropical fish and sea lions. Others invite viewers to take a virtual tour of Andorra via 50 scenic network cameras and see the Space Shuttle in orbit above the Earth. EarthCam called Borton's homegrown effort "a fun way to check snow accumulation and other weather" and "a treat for winter weather aficionados."

"I liked his camera a lot and I guess the judges did, too," Cury said, referring to the 11-member panel that included "Guiding Light" actor and Emmy nominee Ricky Paull Goldin, former CNN Senior Entertainment Correspondent Bill Tush and Iraq War veteran and U.S. Marine Lance Cpl. Frank Cinturati Jr. "It was very unique."

He said the camera's unsophisticated technology and design is "endearing" and a contrast to the streaming videos and stunning vistas by winners the likes of the Toronto Zoo and the Vancouver Aquarium.

"Then there's this cool little camera in the backyard of someone's house looking at a snowman," he said.

Borton, 49, said he bought the camera for about \$50 in 1998 when he and wife Sheryl, who met in a chat room, were dating online. Last winter he mounted it on the windowsill of their ground-floor home office to capture local weather conditions for friends and family downstate who like to snowmobile.

After building a crafts-pattern snowman for Sheryl, a nurse at Otsego Memorial Hospital who collects the decorations, he thought it could help make the cam more interesting.

"The camera was just pointed out the window at a bunch of trees and that was boring me, so I thought why not put the snowman out there," he said.

Now a software program captures an image of the Frosty look-alike once every minute or two and uploads it to the Internet for viewers to see. A legend on the Web page tells them how to use the snowman gauge: "Snowman on bare ground ... no snow ... bad sledding. Snow up to waist ... 24 inches deep ... great sledding. Snow up to neck ... 40 inches deep ... hard to find sled. Can't see Snowman ... 56+ inches deep ... help! ... bring shovel."

Little by little, Borton has added to the Webcam tableau with a goose decoration friends gave him, a "think snow" gauge he bought on eBay and a thermometer mounted on a small table topped by a ceramic cat. His Web page also includes weather-related charts and forecasts, photos of snow-theme license plates like "PLZSNOW" and "SNOWGUY," and links to area snowmobile trail maps and GPS coordinates against a backdrop of falling snow.

While the "top 25" designation carries no prize "other than my 15 minutes of fame," Borton said he's enjoying the extra traffic its promotion on EarthCam is bringing. Since the list's announcement, his Web page has gone from getting about 1,000 hits a day to 5,000. And several businesses and organizations, including Tampa Bay, Fla. television news station Bay News 9, have added a link to the cam on their Web sites.

That a schoolgirl in Paris can see a backyard in Michigan is both "the wonderment of the Internet and the value of the Webcam." Borton is proof that you don't have to spend a fortune on the technology, Cury said.

"Here's someone spending less than \$50 and he's getting the world to look in," he said. "You don't have to go for the big money to be the most interesting Webcam of the year."

Still, the man whose screen name is "snowman" is taking it all with a grain of salt.

"I told my neighbor I'm not getting a big head over this," Borton said. "It's a fluke, a joke. I'm just having a good time with it."

Borton's webcam, called Wilderness Pines after one of his nearby rental properties, can be viewed at www.wildernesspines.com/LiveCam.htm.



Special to the Record-Eagle/Kevin Johnston
Ken Borton of Gaylord with the plywood snowman that is the star of his Web site's 24-hour-a-day Webcam.