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Owl Talks Through Cell Phones

A new method for spying on nature

Mobile phones are now good for anything, apart from their use as phones: to take and see pictures, videos, navigate the web and so on. Biologists have found a novel use: chats with the wild owls. You will understand perhaps only the "who?", but networks of cell phones in the wild could enable researchers to listen for birds and beasts, assessing diversity and if there is wildlife in a certain area. "We're in talks to set up such networks in Costa Rica, Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea. It might be good for ecotourism, to hear the richness of sound there," researcher Dale Joachim, an MIT electrical engineer, told LiveScience. Current methods reveal that biologists could monitor birds and beasts by going repeatedly into the field to call out and listen for responses, but this method has its limitations and expose the researcher to harsh conditions and even dangers. "It dawned on me that could in part be automated," Joachim said. Joachim's team first tested phones in the wild in 2006 by wandering for several hours around midnight in the forests of northeastern Connecticut, during an autumn census of the owls. The scientists employed cell phones modified to listen via microphones and "talk" through loudspeakers. Calls to the phones were taken from a Web site that plays library audio clips of the barred owl (*Strix varia*) and Eastern screech owl (*Megascops asio*). Joachim has had a passion for both owls and day raptors ever since he was young, when he used to take care of injured birds that he nursed back to health and release in the wild. There were concerns that cell phone audio quality was too poor for calls, but the team discovered that the owls reacted just as well to calls from mobile phones as those emitted from CD players. The phones also generally picked up calls from the night birds at a pleasing quality, too. "You could imagine listening to the sounds of birds from remote areas in your office over the Web, instead of music." said Joachim. The state of Maine could use this type of cell phones in the annual census of owls starting March 2008.