

Shot

in the Dark

By Angie Berchielli

Ever wonder what's moving around outside causing your dog to bark at night? Or what's tipping over your bird feeder? Perhaps you'd like to find out what's raiding your vegetable garden, and eating your flowers, leaving tracks and droppings around your home?



Wouldn't you love to know what animals are visiting your property at night?

There's an easy way to find out—simply set up a scout camera. Using a motion sensor, these cameras automatically snap pictures day or night, allowing people to indirectly observe animals that are normally hard to see. The cameras are generally unobtrusive, and are great for capturing nocturnal animals. In fact, many animals, such as bobcats, fisher, pine martens, raccoons, and

deer, raccoon, coyote, fisher, pine marten, bobcats, raccoon, bear, moose, grey fox, red fox, opossum, beaver, skunk, hares, rabbits, muskrats, numerous birds, small mammals like mice, Norway rats, red, grey and flying squirrels, and even unsuspecting mountain bikers.

Scout (or trail) cameras were originally developed by archery hunters to see game in an area and locate good hunting spots. The idea was simple: attach a camera outside where you anticipate animal activity. When a passing animal tripped the motion detector,

I first started using scout cameras in 1995, to get images of fisher in the Adirondacks and bears in the Catskills. I purchased a kit that held the camera in place with a plunger mechanism that fired when the animal tripped the electronic eye. I had to build a camera housing to protect it from the elements. I used my own small point-and-shoot camera. It was very awkward, but it got me hooked.

Today there are many kinds of scout cameras available. Like the original, there are some cameras that use film, but the majority

Notice where there is sign, such as tracks, scat or disturbed areas, and place the trail camera nearby.

numerous species of rodents are pretty indifferent to them. However, black bears are often very curious about these cameras, and can be annoying as they may knock the camera down or even break it. I've been able to capture images of otter,

the camera snapped a picture. The idea caught on and today these cameras are used by people with all kinds of interests, from birders and photographers to people who are just curious about what is roaming around their property.

of cameras are digital and range anywhere from 0.3 megapixels to over 6 megapixels. Depending on the model, some of the features available include a weather-resistant housing, mechanisms for attaching the camera to a

New York State Conservationist, August 2008



tree or post, long-lived battery systems, flash or infrared flash, large memory capacity for more shots, video capability, timers, date stamps, and laser pointers to aim the camera. Certain digitals have a viewer built right into the housing. Which features you choose depend on how much information you want and how much you are willing to spend. You can purchase a scout camera for as little as \$30, but generally the better the camera (more pixels), the greater the cost.

For us folks from the old school, the question of whether to use digital or film can be a real dilemma. While film often produces a sharper image, digital cameras can hold a much greater number of shots. This is extremely useful if you are getting a lot of visits. Last summer, I found a bear tree that was freshly marked. I set up a film camera with a roll of 24 exposures in hopes of capturing any bears that might mark the tree again. Unfortunately, the film was

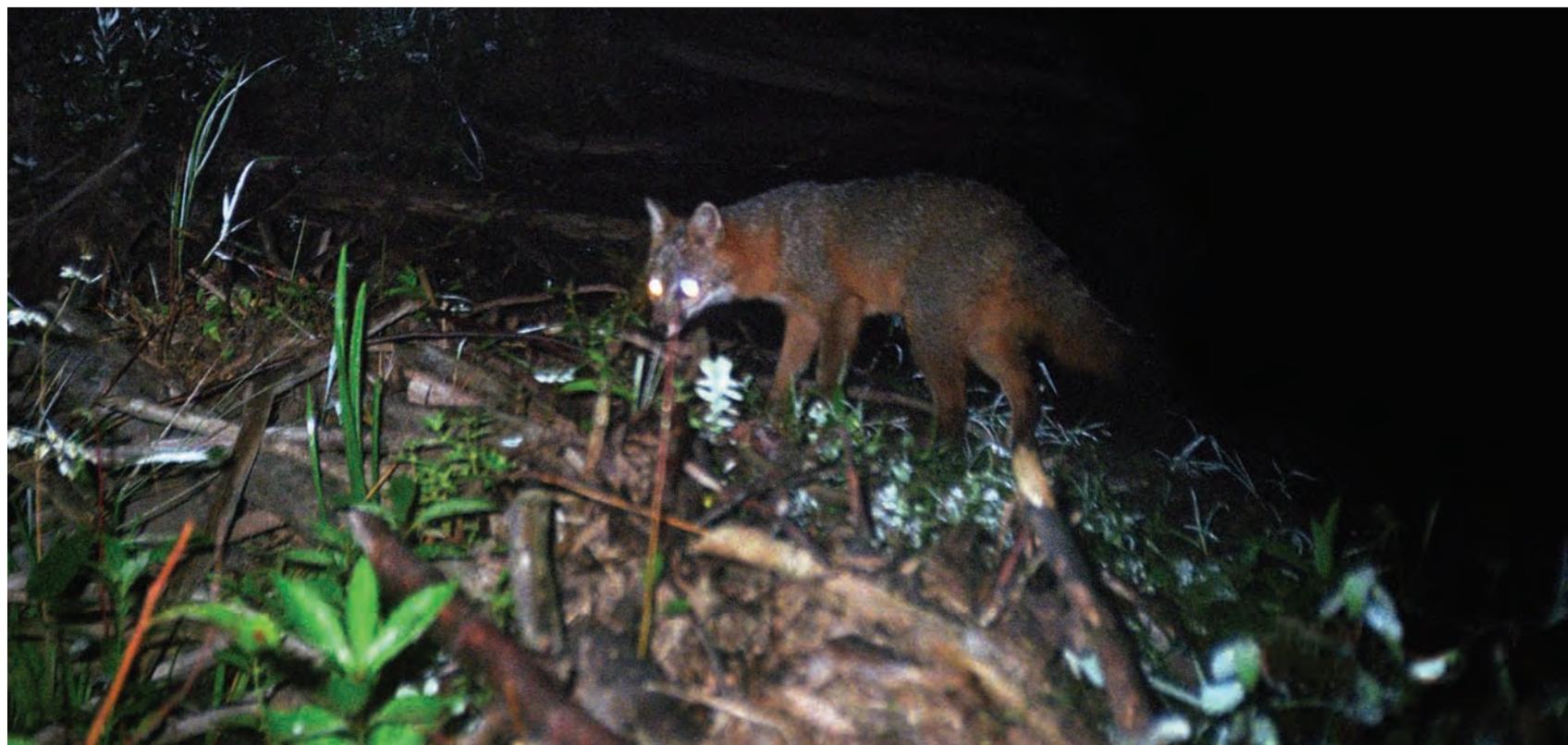
New York State Conservationist, August 2008

completely used up by mice and snowshoe hares that came to the site before the bear. By the time the bear did come by, the camera was out of film and I missed the image. By comparison, I was able to

take 255 images in just one night with a digital camera. A digital scout camera also allows for quick review, and the ability to easily e-mail images to friends and family. However, digitals do require a lot of



Opposite page: A young buck triggers the camera. Above: The flash spooks this coyote. A raccoon searches for a meal.



While film often produces a sharper image, digital cameras can hold a much greater number of shots.

power, and can quickly go through batteries. Also, when the weather is cold, the batteries need to be re-charged or changed more frequently.

Proper camera placement is essential for capturing images. As you

look for good places to locate your camera, notice where there is sign, such as tracks, scat or disturbed areas, and place the camera nearby. If you are in woods, look for trails or travel corridors, where animals are likely to walk by your set-up.

A good place to begin experimenting with a scout camera is at your own bird feeder. If you don't want a lot of images of the birds that come in during the day, I suggest you shut off the camera during the daytime and then re-activate it at dusk. You may be surprised what visits your feeder at night, such as a mouse or a flying squirrel.

Next, you can try other locations. Set up the camera in natural travel lanes, trails, or stream corridors—places where you see a lot of tracks. Beaver dams are good examples and are great spots especially if there is a pronounced trail along the dam or a spillway across the dam. As you develop your skill at recognizing these travel ways and other wildlife sign, you'll find more places in which to set up your camera.

If you live in a rural area, you may want to try using a commercial animal attractant to draw in the elusive animals that live there.



A skunk, possibly searching for grubs.

Above: a grey fox looks eerie with the flash from the camera reflecting in its eyes.



A bobcat caught covering scat.



Researchers and the public use scout cameras to document elusive and rare animals. In New York, these cameras have been used to study black bears, pine marten, fisher and coyotes. The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has a tremendous interest in knowing more about the presence of bobcats, fisher and otters, especially in central and western New York. If you have any images of these animals taken in these areas, DEC would love to hear from you. Visit www.dec.ny.gov, or call your regional office.

New York State Conservationist, August 2008

I use an attractant to entice fisher, bobcats and pine marten. Commercial attractants can be purchased at most sporting goods stores, and when used properly they can keep an animal's interest long enough to get a nicely centered photo, rather than just a fleeting glimpse. If using an attractant, only use a small amount and be sure to keep it away from houses and roads.

If you have children, scout cameras are a great way to get them interested in wildlife. Kids love reviewing the photos to see what's been visiting the area. A scout camera can give a youngster a very positive experience that will stay with them their entire life, and can lead to a better understanding of the wildlife around them. They may capture an interesting sequence of images, or images of animals interacting. For instance, they might capture images of predator and prey visiting the same spot, like a rabbit and a bobcat visiting your bird feeder on the same night.

If you or someone in your family wants to learn more about local wildlife, why not purchase and set up a scout camera? It's a great way to discover what's in your backyard and the pictures might surprise you.

Angie Berchielli is a naturalist, wildlife photographer, trapper and licensed guide.