

BEAUTIFUL

WORLD

WHERE

YOU ARE

WILD GAMES

Camera trapping is the intriguing term used to describe the practice of automatically capturing the image of a subject with a recording device. Since they were first invented in the late nineteenth century, camera traps have been essential tools for research and conservation efforts. One of the first practitioners and advocates of this pursuit was the photographer and Pennsylvania congressman George Shiras III. When Shiras published his photographs in the July 1906 issue of the *National Geographic* magazine, he inaugurated the era of wildlife photography as we know it.

'This was the first wild animal to take its own picture', wrote Shiras as a caption for an image of a deer first published in 1906 and reproduced in his multivolume *Hunting Wild Life With Camera And Flashlight*.¹ In 1926, another enthusiast wrote: 'A bird or a mammal, on tugging at a bait, or in travelling on its runway, will, by pulling a wire, take its own photograph, while the owner of the camera may be miles away.' An 'electrically wired branch' could be used for 'making birds photograph themselves'.²

The supra-political and supra-intellectual draw of these technologies was clear from the time they were introduced. President Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first to recognise their power. In 1906, after seeing Shiras's photographs in the *National Geographic* magazine, he wrote a letter to the ex-Congressman: 'Now, my dear sir, no other work you can do (not even going to Congress; still less, writing articles for pamphlets or magazines utterly evanescent in character) is as important.'

Humans would soon be able to take pictures of themselves without the need to trigger a shutter manually, just like the wild game hunted by the photographer, and heat and motion sensors would take the place of wires. Today, public surveillance cameras photograph us without us even noticing. Britain alone has approximately one surveillance camera per eleven individuals, and in 2013 it was estimated that the average person is filmed about seventy times per day.³

On 14 April 1996, inspired by nature documentaries, Jennifer Ringley, a nineteen-year-old girl studying at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, decided to make a film in which she herself would be the subject. She bought a webcam, wrote software that enabled it to upload images continuously to the internet, and turned it on for the next seven years of her life. Anyone could peek into her room simply by visiting her site, jennicam.org. Jenni is now known as the first lifecaster on the internet.



Deer Taking its own Picture



'[Y]ou can see wild America and you can see lions and badgers and antelope eating and sleeping and doing what they do, but for some reason wanting to see people doing the same thing is sick and perverse', she told David Letterman during his popular late-night television show. Letterman remarked, 'This will replace television, as we know it now ... because this is really all people want ... people are lonely and desperate ... miserable human beings and they're reaching out; they want to see life somewhere else taking place. It's comforting, don't you think?' Jenni agreed: 'Before me there was the coffeepot cam, and where I got my idea from: the fishcam.' But fish, she noted, are 'interesting for about five minutes ... I thought if a person were to do this that would be more interesting.'

'Men world-wide regard Jenni as their virtual girlfriend', reported the *Wall Street Journal* in 1998.⁴ During those years, some three to four million people watched jennicam.org regularly, and approximately seven million logged in during peak interest in her site. When Jenni first turned on her camera, the images took fifteen minutes to load, but soon the time dropped to three minutes, and lifecasting became an option for anyone with a webcam, a computer and an internet connection.

In 2002, cellphone companies started adding built-in cameras to their phones. Sending photographs and uploading images to computers and the internet became easier than ever. The next year, Jenni announced she was shutting down her website. Just before the new year started, her site went dark. But the end of her experiment was a new beginning: regular internet users could now do what she had done as a lone geek pioneer at the dawn of the internet age.

Referring to the explosion of new 'social media' practices, from tweeting to Facebooking, the tech entrepreneur Anil Dash recently wrote, 'Now we are all Jennicam'. In one sense, this is true, but a longer historical perspective – taking us back to the early twentieth century and that startled deer – leads us to a different conclusion: now we are all wild game.

1 George Shiras III, *Hunting Wild Life With Camera And Flashlight* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1935), 33.

2 First page: composite image from George Shiras III, 'Photographing Wild Game with Flashlight and Camera', *National Geographic Magazine* (July 1906) and jennicam.org. Henry R. Carey, 'Camera-Trapping: A Novel Device for Wild Animal Photography', *Journal of Mammalogy* 7, no. 4 (1926), 278.

3 The British Security Industry Association report for 2013 stated that about 5.9 million CCTV cameras were in operation in Britain.

4 Quoting Leo Hindery Jr in Timothy Hanrahan, 'Slice of Life on Web's Jennicam Is Deemed Too Raw by One Critic', *Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 1998.