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On Fur and Feather, Crittercams Turn 20 Seeking New Vistas

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From left: Birgit Buhleier/National Geographic; National Geographic; Greg Marshall/National Geographic; National Geographic

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A leopard seal, left, with camera attached, and an underwater image the seal produced. Rodney the penguin getting ready for a dive, and plunging in.

By [WARREN E. LEARY](#)
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WASHINGTON — For photographers lacking training, experience and even the ability to click a shutter button, they produce remarkable pictures. Under the sea, deep in the woods and high in the sky, furry, feathery and leathery-skinned creatures are opening up vistas by taking cameras where no human can go.

This is the world of animal-borne

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(National Geographic)

imaging celebrated last month at a symposium sponsored by the [National Geographic Society](#) for the 20th anniversary of its Crittercam, the device that started it all.



Since its debut in 1987 on the back of a loggerhead turtle, the Crittercam and similar devices developed by others have grown smaller and more powerful.

“It’s more than just a camera now,” said Greg Marshall, the marine biologist and now filmmaker who invented the Crittercam. “We are now including more instruments to gather more data while at the same time reducing everything in size.”

Mr. Marshall, who heads a team of 10 that has made Crittercams for hundreds of projects, displayed the new Generation V at the symposium, which he organized. The original was a cumbersome 7-pound device that could operate at ocean depths of 650 feet. The latest, about the size of a large flashlight and weighing less than 1.5 pounds, works well below 3,000 feet.

The idea of mounting video cameras on animals came to Mr. Marshall in 1986 on a dive off Belize when a shark approached him. When the animal quickly turned away, he noticed a sucker fish clinging to it and came up with the idea that putting a camera in place of the sucker fish would allow witnessing the shark’s behavior without disturbing it.

Crittercams have been attached to sharks, sea lions and other marine animals, and, more recently, to land animals.

Part of the work includes developing glues, harnesses, suction cups and other methods to attach the instrument harmlessly and later have it drop off for retrieval.

Birds are a new addition, Mr. Marshall said. Dr. Christian Rutz of Oxford, who attended the meeting here, recently reported on tiny camera called feathercam to monitor crows on New Caledonia in the Pacific and discovering their use of twigs and grass stems as tools to root out food.

Tracey L. Rogers, director of the Australian Marine Mammal Research Center in Sydney,

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said Crittercam was a powerful tool in her work with predatory leopard seals in Antarctica.

“In studying foraging,” Dr. Rogers said at the meeting, “you want to see how our animal models align with reality. With a camera, you actually see what they do. You don’t have to guess.”

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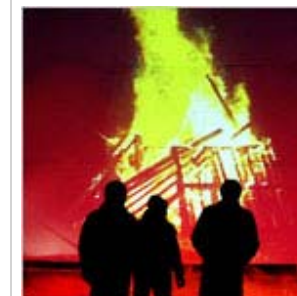


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