

Research goes to the birds

Science understanding monitored through citizen scientists

By KATHERINE ARNOLD
Special to The Battalion

While most of the sciences involve hours of tedious labor in a laboratory taking measurements, conducting experiments and analyzing data, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology based at Cornell University has a different approach — letting volunteers across the country collect data by looking out their back window.

Such projects include Project FeederWatch, Classroom Feeder-Watch, Project Pigeon Watch and the Cornell Nest Box Network. For a small fee (about \$20), amateur bird watchers receive educational materials about the project and directions for recording information about the types of birds they see and their activities. Participants then submit their findings back to ornithologists at Cornell.

These types of projects, often referred to as "citizen science," hope to both foster science education and provide a valuable resource of data collection, said Dr. Bruce Lewenstein, associate professor in the Department of Communication at Cornell University, who is also involved in evaluating the effectiveness of these projects as a way to foster scientific understanding.

"These projects have as their goal some attempt to popularize science; that is, to make science more accessible to nonscientists," Lewenstein said. "It gives people a sense of being involved in a project that has meaning."

And, in fact, the projects are meaningful. The information col-

lected is used to track trends in populations, activity cycles and breeding habits. "We'd like to think that citizen science is a way to tap into people's enthusiasm," he said.

Lewenstein spoke to students and faculty at Texas A&M on Thursday about citizen science projects and their function as ways to promote scientific understanding. His visit was sponsored by the Center for Science and Technology Policy and Ethics at Texas A&M University. Lewenstein's work with one of the projects, the Cornell Nest Box Network, involves assessing what the bird watchers learn by participating in the project. The evaluators look at bird knowledge, environmental attitude, overall perceptions and attitudes toward science by having participants fill out evaluation forms and by interviewing participants via telephone or mail. Preliminary results have shown that this citizen science project approach has been useful.

Beyond the success of the local projects, these results at some point will be compared to overall scientific understanding, Lewenstein said. "We need to understand the relationship between these individual local projects and the global level of science literacy," he said.

Projects such as these fill a need for fostering scientific understanding, said Dr. Susanna Priest, associate professor of journalism at Texas A&M and director for the Center of Science and Technology Policy and Ethics.

"There is a strong and widely recognized need for more ways to involve nonscientists in making de-

cisions about science and science policy," she said. "People who are not scientists need to be able to relate science to their everyday lives or they may not see the value in scientific research."

Several other projects work to incorporate nonscientists into scientific research. The Globe Program is a government-sponsored program that involves ordinary citizens in environmental research. For children, the National Geographic Kids Network works with schools to develop curricula to turn kids into scientists by having them collect rain samples, study solar energy and look at problems cities face with trash disposal.

Programs like this are most suited to the natural sciences, said Gene Charleton, science writer for the communications division of the Texas Engineering Experiment Station, and have been applied in astronomy and archaeology.

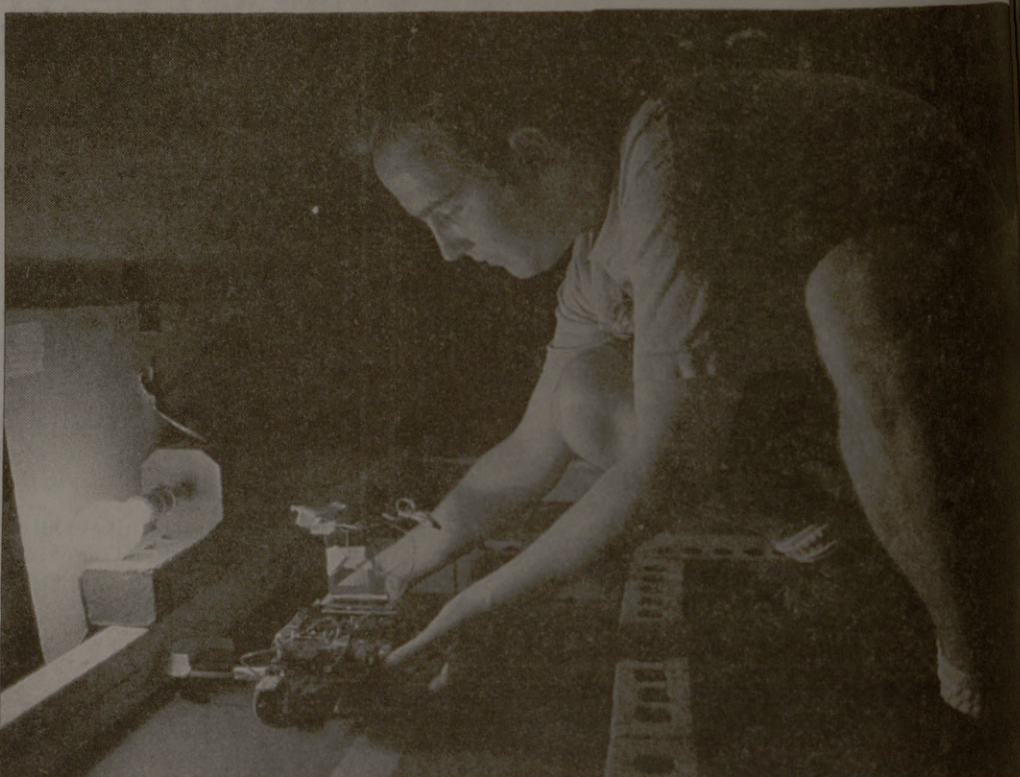
"Look around and think of how many political decisions are based on scientific questions," Charleton said. "People need to understand science to make good decisions."

Lewenstein said he hopes more citizen science projects can be created to provide an opportunity for the nonscientist to learn more about the scientific community.

"You're not just talking to people about science, you're engaging people in science," he said. "You learn not only what science is capable of, but what it's not capable of."

For more information on the Cornell Lab of Ornithology bird watching projects, visit the Web site at birds.cornell.edu.

On to the millineum



Bruce Blair, a senior computer science major, calibrates the light sensors on his robot before a run in a demonstration in the Bright building Friday afternoon.

PC sales still moving upward

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Despite fears of cooling demand and swollen inventories, the personal computer industry has continued to grow this year.

Appetite for inexpensive PCs helped push growth of worldwide and U.S. shipments into the double digits during the January-May period, according to two market research companies: International Data Corp. and Dataquest Inc.

"We believe ... end user demand is healthy," said Hause, an analyst with IDC in Mountain View.

Domestic shipments grew 16 percent during the quarter compared with the same period a year ago, according to Dataquest, based in San Jose. IDC reported a 14 percent gain. Shipments worldwide rose 14 percent, according to Dataquest, and 10 percent, according to IDC.

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Tiffany Inbody, Editor in Chief

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