# Home security cameras as a tool for behavior observations and science equity

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## Abstract:

Reliably capturing transient animal behavior in the field and laboratory remains a logistical and financial challenge, especially for small ectotherms. Here, we present a camera system that is affordable, accessible, and suitable to monitor small, cold-blooded animals historically overlooked by commercial camera traps, such as small amphibians. The system is weather-resistant, can operate offline or online, and allows collection of time-sensitive

behavioral data in laboratory and field conditions with continuous data storage for up to four weeks. The lightweight camera can also utilize phone notifications over Wi-Fi so that observers can be alerted when animals enter a space of interest, enabling sample collection at proper time periods. We present our findings, both technological and scientific, in an effort to elevate tools that enable researchers to maximize use of their research budgets. We discuss the relative affordability of our system for researchers in South America, which is home to the largest population of ectotherm diversity.

## Introduction:

Accurately quantifying animal behavior is important for understanding how behavioral adaptations evolve and influence the fitness and survival of a species. However, human presence can obscure natural behaviors (Sorge et al., 2014; Puścian & Knapska, 2022) and remote cameras bypass the need for physical presence of the researcher. Remote camera approaches are used to study population-level patterns (Tape & Gustine, 2014; Jachowski et al., 2015; Buchholz et al,. 2021; Cserkész et al., 2023) and individual animals to understand behavior (Caravaggi et al., 2020). Mammals and birds are the most common fauna monitored with cameras in the wild and only a small range of studies (<2%) have focused on ectotherms, specifically amphibians and reptiles (Burton et al., 2015; Hobbs and Brehme, 2017; Welbourne et al., 2017; Barata et al., 2018; Amber et al., 2021). This gap between ectotherms and endotherms can be explained by both technical and logistical difficulties, where for use in remote areas, an ideal camera system should be capable of detecting small ectotherm movement, weather-resistant, and operational in the absence of electricity and phone connectivity.

Differences in science productivity play against a backdrop of resource disparity. Economically exploited countries in the Global South hold much of the world's ectotherm biodiversity, and yet accessibility and affordability of camera traps for local researchers can be prohibitive. For example, increasing camera weather resistance correlates with higher prices and many camera traps rely on Global North cellular networks. We here describe an affordable camera system (Wyze), that uses pixel change, rather than IR detection, to trigger recording. We benchmark the system against three commonly used camera traps and discuss their suitability to monitor cold-blooded animals. We present a case study on how this camera system can be used to quantify social behavior in a small, diurnal poison frog (*Ranitomeya variabilis*) both in captivity and in the wild. Finally, we suggest efforts to make the system more available for colleagues in the Global South as an example of how privileged institutions can actively contribute to making science more accessible.

## Results & Discussion:

*Benchmarking remote monitoring systems for small ectotherms*

We compared specifications, performance and availability of three monitoring systems and two home security cameras to evaluate the suitability for lab and field studies of amphibian behavior (**Table 1**). We found that the home security camera Wyze v3 is on par or superior to other professional systems regarding image and video quality, detection methods, field of view and motion detection video length while being 3-18 times less expensive.

The main challenge in remotely recording ectotherms is that many cameras rely on passive infrared sensors (PIR) to detect thermal emissions (heat) of endotherms (mainly mammals and birds) (Savidge & Seibert, 1988; Karanth, 1995; Hobbs & Brehme, 2017). Wyze v3 is the most affordable in- and outdoor camera that uses pixel change, rather than IR detection, to trigger recording, which enables detection of ectotherms. In contrast to other systems we evaluated, Wyze v3 has multiple degrees of night vision capabilities, including color night vision for dawn and dusk hours and for fully dark environments both near-infrared for close distance (940 nm) and far-infrared light range for far distance (850 nm).

An additional feature that is advantageous in the laboratory is the ability to signal to cellular devices to notify the user of a trigger. Many home security devices use the same technical infrastructure for monitoring filmed areas, such as a baby's nursery or the front door to a home. Wyze v3 connects to local networks rather than having 3G or 4G coverage, which is better for accessibility in countries in the Global South. Other considerations for remote recording of ectotherms are the humid wet environments, device weight, and connectivity. Most cameras we evaluated are water resistant and suitable for outdoor placement. Wyze cameras are also relatively lightweight, which is critical for field applications where cameras are carried long distances to record for long periods of time.

Wyze cameras have been used to record behavior in frogs (Gupta et al., 2016), fish (McGaugh et al., 2020), pigs (Netzley et al., 2021), and chimpanzees (Havercamp et al., 2022). The diversity of animals and environments studied with these cameras illustrate their adaptability for many research projects.

**Table 1. Wyze v3 performance for studying ectotherm behavior in comparison to four leading surveillance devices.** We benchmark features and accessibility of Wyze v3 against four most commonly used camera traps (Google Nest Camera, Reconyx Hyperfire 2, Bushnell Nature View HD and Bushnell Trophy Cam HD,). We discuss each feature in the context of studies on amphibian behavior. Abbreviations: LTE: long term evolution (a standard for wireless data transmission), HD: high definition, PIR: passive infrared sensor, IR: infrared, IP65 and IP66: indices for ingress protection (weather resistance, the higher the better), AA: single cell dry battery. Prices retrieved March 2023.

| System Specifications | Consequence on Amphibian Studies | Wyze Camera v3 | Google Nest Camera, Indoor & Wired | Reconyx Hyperfire 2 Cellular Professional Covert IR Camera | Bushnell Nature View HD | Bushnell Trophy Cam HD Brown Model 119676 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to notify phone with local network | Quickly alerts researchers to behavior | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Ability to notify phone without local network | Quickly alerts researchers to behavior | No | No | No | No | No |
| Cellular Source | Alerts rely on either local networks or cellular ones | 2.4 GHz local Wifi | 2.4GHz/5GHz) Wi-Fi | 3-4G LTE (ATT & Verizon, some international plans) | None | None |
| Price (USD) | Cost influences number of cameras purchasable | $35.98 | $99.99 | $659.99 | $169.99 | $100 |
| Image Resolution | Equivalent across most cameras | HD 1920 x 1080p | HD (1920 x 1080) | 1080P HD Widescreen | HD 1080P | HD 1080P |
| Video Quality and sound | Equivalent across most cameras | HD 1920 x 1080p | HD (1920 x 1080) | 720P HD Video with Audio (cellular enabled cameras do not transmit video) | HD 1920x1080 p | HD 1280x720p |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Detection Method (Day) | Risk of not detecting amphibians with PIR | Pixel change | Pixel change | PIR | PIR | PIR |
| Motion Detection Video length | Variable, depends on research goal | Up to 5 minutes per notification | Up to 3 hours of event history totally | Up to 90 seconds per notification | up to 60s | 5-60s |
| Continuous Video length | Remote monitoring of behaviors that may last longer than several minutes. | 24/7 for up to 4 weeks with SD card | 24/7 for up to 10 days with subscription | No continuous recording abilities | No continuous recording abilities | No continuous recording abilities |
| Detection Method (Night and wavelength in nm) | IR wavelength that can detect amphibians | Near-IR (940) and Far-IR (850) | Far-IR (850) | No-Glow™ High Output Covert IR | PIR | PIR |
| Camera weight (g) | Lower weights are more carryable for fieldwork | 98.8 | 393 | ~750 | 246.6 | ~545 |
| IP Score | IP66 best for heavy pressurized water exposure, IP65 handles rain | IP65 | None provided. | IP66 | IP66 | IP66 |
| Operating Temperatures (°C) | Most cameras tolerate most biome temperature ranges | -20 - +40 | 0-+40 | -40 - +60 | -4 - +140 | -20 - +60 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Night vision distance (m) | Depends on animal of interest | None provided | 15 | 45 | 18.3 | No data available |
| Cloud saving abilities | Depends on researcher needs | Yes, with extra fees | Yes, with extra fees | No | No | No |
| Highest amount of memory on camera (Gb) | Higher Gb allows for cameras being left alone longer | 256 | Up to | 512 | 32 | 32 |
| Power source (years last) | USB requires continuous power source, which needs to be resolved before field work | USB | USB | 12 AA (2 yrs) | AA (4-12) Up to one year | AA (8-12) |
| Field of View | Depends on camera's ability to orient and point towards area of interest | 130° | 135° | None provided | 50° | None provided |

*Proof of concept in the lab and field*

As ectotherms constitute more than 99% of species diversity (Wilson, 1992; Ohlberger, 2013), affordable remote camera systems would substantially improve approaches for studying behavior across a wide range of species. In this case study, we show how Wyze v3 overcomes challenges of monitoring ectotherm behavior under lab and field conditions by monitoring parental behavior of *Ranitomeya variabilis* (**Figure 1**). In this species, eggs are laid terrestrially and then males transport their offspring to a pool of water, where the tadpole completes development (Brown et al., 2008).

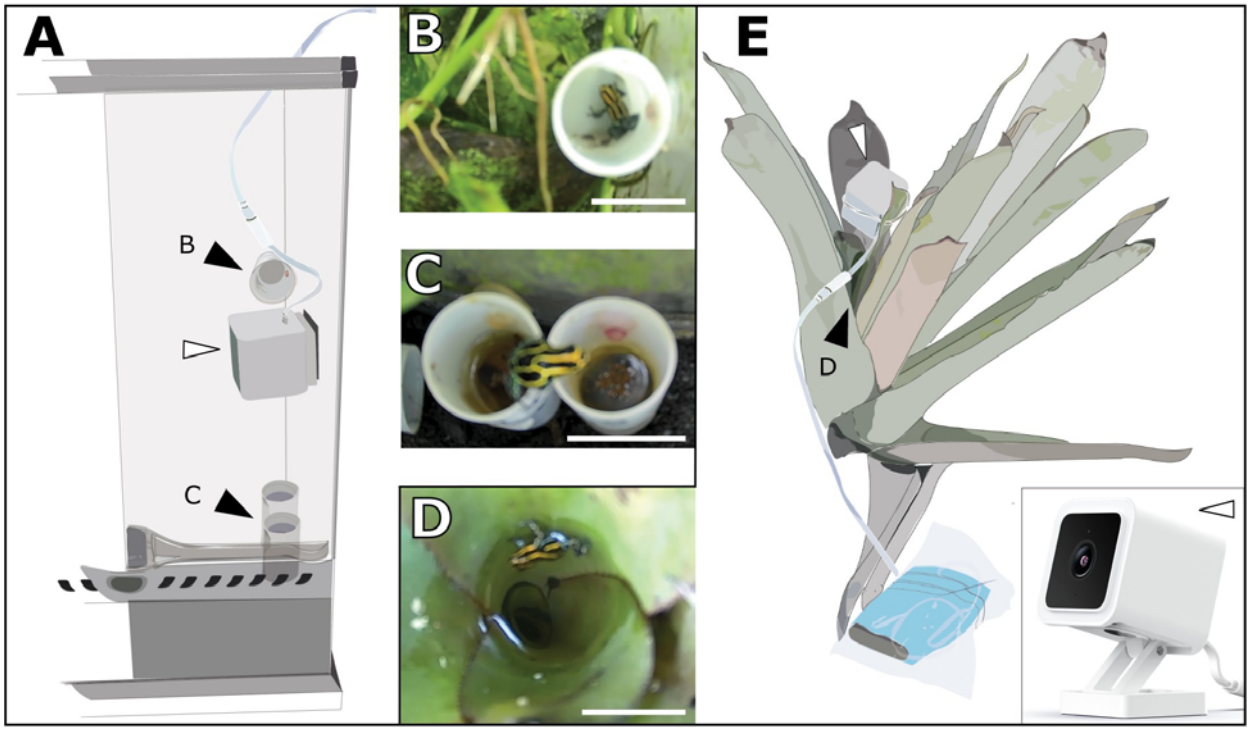


**Figure 1: Camera installations in lab vivaria and in the field**. **(A)** In lab vivaria, velcro was used to fix cameras above the desired focal subject, allowing for easy removal of the camera to switch SD cards. For monitoring parent-offspring interactions, the camera body (inlay, white arrow) was adjusted to focus on either the canisters containing the eggs that were mounted horizontally (inlay B) or the tadpole nursery (inlay C) (black arrows). The USB cables were connected to an outlet via a USB charging station. Inlay pictures represent screenshots extracted from the recordings obtained from **(B)** egg attendance, **(C)** tadpole attendance in captivity and **(D)** tadpole attendance in the field. White scale bars represent 30 mm. **(E)** In nature, tadpoles grow up in water bodies formed by tightly overlapping leaf bases (black arrow, inlay (D) of large terrestrial plants called bromeliads. For observations, rubber bands were used to mount the cameras on bromeliad leaves above natural tadpole nurseries. The cameras (white arrows) were connected to the USB port of a power bank protected from the rain by two layers of plastic zip lock bags. Zoomed camera photo courtesy of Wyze Laboratories.

We first used Wyze v3 for recording and quantifying parental care behavior in laboratory vivaria. We specially tested whether there were sex differences in parental interactions with egg clutches or tadpoles in two *R. variabilis* families (**Figure 2**). Only the father showed clutch attendance, where he visited daily, with a maximum of four times in a day, over a period of 10

days. He spent more time with his clutch for the first 3 days after deposition (roughly 10 min) compared to the last 3 days of his clutch's development just before tadpole transport (roughly 5 min). These visits were typically spent touching or sitting on the eggs. In contrast, clutch visits by the female were limited to one brief event without physical contact with the clutch. During tadpole transport, the father transported each tadpole individually (n=3), with tadpole onboarding lasting 36 min on average. We also observed canister site fidelity for raising clutches, where the day after tadpole transport finished, the male resumed courtship and after two days of courting, the next clutch of eggs were laid.

Next, we observed nursery visitations by parents. To distinguish hydration from parenting, we added an empty water pool adjacent to the nursery. We found that both the male and female preferred to visit unoccupied canister pools (Figure 2B; 60% of female visits and 67% of male visits). The number and length of visits to tadpole pools was equivalent in both parents (Figure 2C).

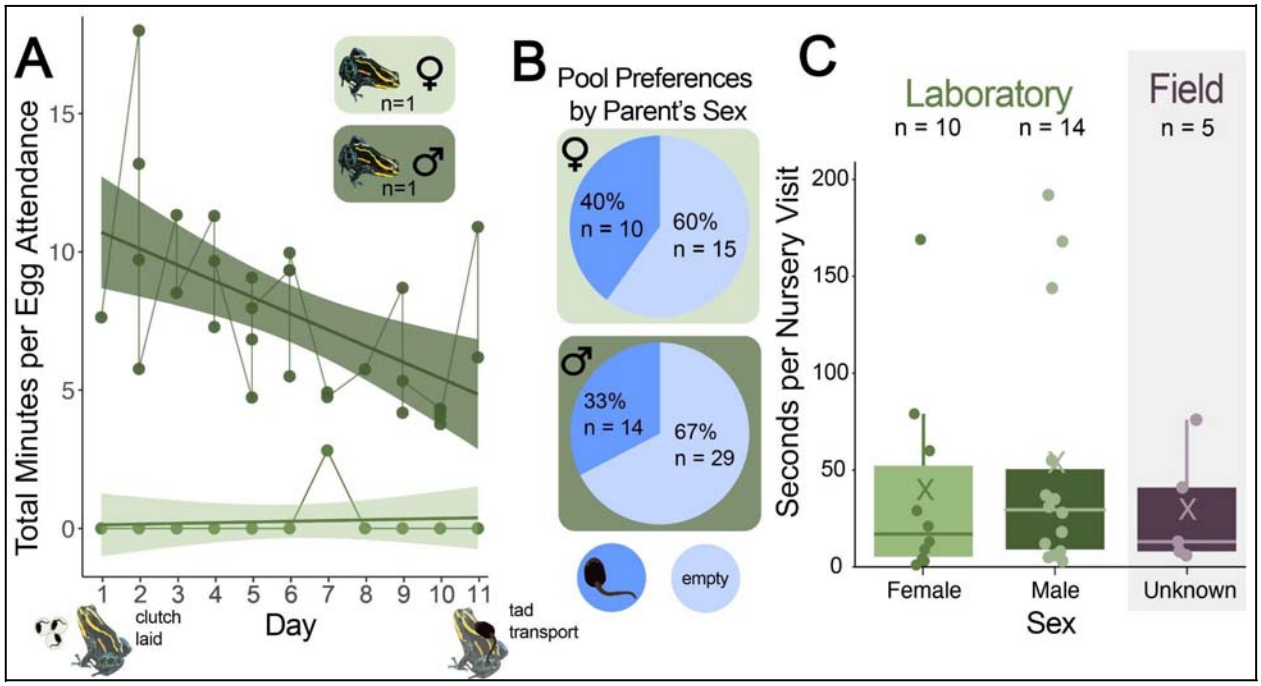


**Figure 2: Comparisons of parental investment across offspring stage and in different environments**. **(A)** Clutch attendance was a male duty (dark green). Dads displayed high time investments on visiting a freshly laid clutch that steadily decreased as eggs matured. **(B)** Tadpole nursery visits by female (light green) and male (dark green) *R. variabilis* in comparison to visits of an adjacent water canister (blue) not housing offspring during the same monitoring period. **(C)** Captive frogs (green) visited tadpoles more often and exhibited more variance in durations of the nursery visits than wild frogs (purple), ranging from several seconds to minutes.

Remote observations of poison frogs in their natural humid and rainy climates require cameras with heat and water tolerance. We used the Wyze v3 cameras to record *R. variabilis* parental behavior in the Amazonian rainforest, where daily rainfall at the field site fluctuated between 0 to 30 mm and temperatures ranged from 20.5°C to 50°C. We monitored five tadpoles in bromeliad leaf axil pools for 10 days. Frogs visited tadpoles with less frequency (5 visits) and duration

(average of 29 seconds) compared to the lab environment (Figure 1A, E). We also recorded transient behaviors that are rarely documented, like *R. variabilis* adult interactions with heterospecific intruders (Supp Video 1), predator encounters (Supp Video 2), and aggressive behavior between tadpoles (Supp Video 3, 0:18).

The Wyze v3 camera allowed us to easily compare parental behavior of *R. variabilis*, a very small frog, in lab and field conditions, and capture transient interspecies interactions occurring in nature. We provide the first evidence that *R. variabilis* surveys water bodies that house tadpoles in lab and field conditions. In the laboratory, we confirmed tadpole transport in *R. variabilis* is performed by male frogs (Summers et al., 2008), and describe how egg attendance behavior is being performed by males. Finally, we confirmed the camera could be used to record nocturnal ectotherm behavior by recording the fringed leaf frog (*Cruziohyla craspedopus*), which successfully triggered our camera (Supp Video 4; 0:48).

*Camera resource equity in scientific research*

Much of the world's ectothermic biodiversity is in the Global South, where research takes place against a backdrop of colonialism and economic exploitation (Green, 2019; Haelewaters et al., 2021; Mahajan et al., 2022). Research is a fundamental activity taking place in almost every higher education institution, but funding inequity between the Global North and South impacts the types of questions that can be asked and how those questions will be answered (Chankseliani, 2023). In contrast to PhD programs in the US and Europe, graduate students in many South American countries pay for their own tuition and research, usually by incurring debt that takes years to pay off (Britton et al., 2019). We purposely searched for an affordable solution to remote monitoring of ectotherms in field conditions, as field equipment and technology for research are not always available in the Global South and if they are, the prices are very high. We also provide here a Spanish translation of the Wyze v3 app and quick guide to counteract the disadvantage incurred by the dominance of the English in science (Ramirez-Castaneda, 2020). Researchers in the Global North have a scientific and ethical responsibility to lead or participate in efforts that make scientific knowledge and tools more accessible.

## Methods

*Captive bred animals*

All *Ranitomeya variabilis* used in the laboratory study were captive bred in our poison frog colony or purchased from Ruffing's Ranitomeya (Tiffon, Ohio, USA). One adult male and one adult female were housed together in a 45.72 x 30.48 x 30.48 cm terraria (Exoterra, Rolf C. Hagen USA, Mansfield, MA) containing sphagnum moss substrate, driftwood, live *Pothos* plants, horizontally mounted film canisters as egg deposition sites, and film canisters filled with water (treated with reverse osmosis R/O Rx, Josh's Frogs, Owosso, MI) for tadpole deposition. Terraria were automatically misted ten times daily for 20 seconds each, and frogs were fed live *Drosophila melanogaster* flies dusted with a vitamin powder and springtails three times per

week. The observation housing was set on a 12:12 light cycle from 6:00 to 18:00. The average temperature and humidity of the observation was recorded for each day of observation, usually around 25°C and 95% humidity within the tank. Camera recording of *Ranitomeya* in our captive breeding colony is approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee at Stanford University (protocol #34242).

All *Cruziohyla craspedopus* tree frog juveniles (Fringed leaf frog) used in this study were captive bred in Wikiri (Wikiri Sapoparque, Quito, Ecuador) and purchased from Indoor Ecosystems (Whitehouse, Ohio, USA). Individuals were housed within 45.72 x 30.48 x 30.48 cm terraria (Exoterra, Rolf C. Hagen USA, Mansfield, MA). Terraria were automatically misted ten times daily for 20 seconds each, and frogs were fed live crickets three times per week. As these frogs are nocturnal, the observation housing was set on a 12:12 light cycle from 15:00 to 3:00. The average temperature and humidity of the observation was recorded for each day of observation, usually around 24°C and 98% humidity within the tank. Camera recording of *C. craspedopus* is approved under Stanford University APLAC protocol #34304.

*Field study site and wild study population*

Cameras were tested for their usability in the field in a tropical primary rainforest in French Guiana. Testing was conducted in a natural study site situated on top of the mountain 'Inselberg' in vicinity to the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique managed research station (4°5' N, 52°41' W) within the Nature Reserve ´Les Nouragues´. The study site is characterized by patches of Clusia trees separated by bare granite rocks and exposed to extreme environmental conditions (e.g. temperature oscillations between 18°C - 75°C)(Sarthou et al., 2009). The study site is inhabited by a population of *Ranitomeya variabilis* (CITES Appendix II, IUCN Conservation status: Least Concern). Camera recording of the study population on Inselberg was approved by the scientific committee of the Nouragues Ecological Research Station and under Stanford University APLAC protocol #33691.

*Field study species*

*Ranitomeya variabilis* is a small dendrobatid poison frog that uses bromeliads as a resource for egg-laying and tadpole-rearing. Adult frogs are polygamous and typically lay clutches of 3-4 eggs into small arboreal bromeliads of the species *Catopsis berteroniana* that are abundant on Clusia trees. Male frogs defend their territory and shuttle hatched tadpoles to individual water bodies that form in the leaf axils of the large terrestrial tank bromeliad *Aechmea aquilega*. The cannibalistic tadpoles grow up in individual pools of 80 ml (Poelman et al., 2013) where they feed on algae and leaf debris until they complete their development after about 3 months (Poelman and Dicke, 2007). While this species is not considered to engage in further parental care (Brown et al., 2008), frogs of this population have been documented to deposit fertilized eggs into bromeliad pools occupied by tadpoles at the start of the dry season (Poelman and Dicke, 2007). How frogs assess tadpole presence and resource availability to coordinate shuttling of offspring to unoccupied pools under these extreme environmental conditions is not known.

*Camera setup*

Detailed instructions on camera setup and usage can be found in the Supplementary materials on GitHub.

In the laboratory, Wyze v3 cameras were adhered by velcro onto the side of the Exoterra tanks and suspended above the tadpole canister, with the face of the camera approximately 15.5-17.5 cm above the bottom of the canister. For egg care observations, Wyze v3 cameras are oriented horizontally, with the face of the camera facing approximately 10 cm from the canister entry site.

Cameras were charged using their prepackaged USB cords and connected via a Nexwell USB charging station (Amazon, Bellevue, WA, USA) to the building outlets. Cameras were given 128 Gb SD cards for continuous recording. 128 Gb SD cards fill after approximately 10 days, and are switched by researchers and replaced with an empty SD card.

In the field, Wyze v3 cameras were equipped with a 128 GB SD card and set to the desired operating mode (motion triggered or continuous) using the WiFi of the field station before being transported to the field. We recommend setting the phone to the time zone in which the camera will be used during setup to avoid incorrect timestamps after changing time zone. Cameras were set to motion detection using the lowest sensibility, sound detection and notifications were switched off. All SD cards were formatted in the camera prior to use. Cameras were disconnected from power sources and WiFi during the transport to the study site. We used Anker PowerCore Fusion 10000 Model A1623 (9700mAh/35.21Wh) power banks for short-term (1 day) monitoring and Anker PowerCore26800 Model A1277 as well as 2nd Gen Astro E7 ModelA1210 (both 26800mAh/96.48Wh) for longer-term (10 days) surveil of tadpoles in their natural habitat. For long-term operation, we replaced the power bank every 2 days and recharged the devices in the camp. Prior to field implementation, we tested the efficiency of these power banks and found the operating mode of the camera (continuous vs motion-triggered) did not affect the monitoring time.

Cameras were labeled and secured to bromeliad leaves 20-40 cm above the water reservoir housing a tadpole (Fig.1 E, black arrow) using commercial rubber bands (1 E, white arrow). Power banks were wrapped with an absorbent diaper and placed in 2 plastic zip lock bags with their opening facing into different directions to minimize the amount of rain water seeping in (Figure 1 E). We purposefully chose inexpensive zip lock plastic bags to cover the power supply from rain to test the operation of our system on a budget. Alternatively, plastic bags can be replaced by a variety of outdoor waterproof boxes designed for electrical equipment. We tried to shelter Power banks from the sun and rain by placing them under bromeliad leaves. To assure an accurate timestamp, we recorded the screen of our mobile phone showing the accurate time as a first action with the camera after reconnecting the camera to the power source. We replaced the SD card every 2 days when changing the power source to back up contained footage and moved the camera to a different tadpole nursery after 10 days.

*Data Processing*

With continuous recording, every minute of every day is recorded. Videos were first processed and kept only when frogs entered the camera. The scorer marked the times the frog

entered the focal canister, defining entrance and exit as when the entire frog's body was within the canister. Data processing was performed in RStudio (version 4.2.3, PBC, Boston, MA). Figures were created using the package '*ggplot2*' (Wickham, 2016) and in Adobe Illustrator (Adobe Illustrator 2023).


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## Data Availability:

Videos as well as code for running visualizations can be found in supplementary materials. Detailed instructions for setting up cameras can be found on Github.

## Author Contributions:

*Conceptualization:* BG, MTF

*Data Curation:* BG, MTF, GR, DPM
*Formal Analysis:* BG
*Investigation:* BG, MTF, GR, AL, DPM
*Visualization:* BG, MTF
*Methodology:* BG, MTF
*Writing - Original Draft:* BG, MTF, DPM
*Writing - Review and Editing:* BG, MTF, DPM, LAO
*Project Administration :* BG, MTF, LAO
*Supervision:* BG, MTF
*Resources:* LAO *Funding*
*Acquisition:* LAO

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