

DAILY NEWS

Keep hi-tech tabs on pets

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Wireless technology may not have kept Molly the deli mouser from wandering into the walls of a Manhattan landmark building, but an implanted microchip, a cheap computer and some low-cost wireless gadgets are allowing one busy cat-crazy NYU professor to keep tabs on his kitty, Noodles.

"When he jumps on the bed, the scanner reads a tag and it sends me an e-mail," said Tom Igoe, assistant arts professor in the interactive telecommunications program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

To the layman, keeping a wireless scan on your feline may sound tricky, but Igoe, who teaches courses on physical computing and networking, said even the most tech-phobic worried pet owner can easily keep a close eye on his or her animal companion.

The setup costs only a few hundred dollars - or less if the parts are purchased used or on eBay - and can be set up in places the animal tends to rest, eat or play.

Rigging up the high-tech kitty-sitter goes something like this: A scanner that reads microchips is located under the mattress and detects when the cat is on the bed. A wireless Web cam, which is affixed to the dresser, captures the mischievous kitty in action, or while he's taking a cat nap. A microcontroller sends an e-mail message through the Internet, which alerts Igoe in his Greenwich Village office to look on his Web browser and catch Noodles in action.

His reaction to the real-time video: "Ahwww."

Igoe, who is writing a book on physical computing, said he brainstormed the high-tech cat-nanny solution as a simple way to teach his students about using digital technologies to sense and respond to a wider range of human physical expression.

And, besides, the professor said, "It amuses me."

These days, scores of wireless pet products designed to track pets and keep them safe are making their way to market, which the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association estimates will be a whopping \$38 billion this year.

A bone-shaped cell phone for dogs is expected to hit the shelves sometime this year. The wireless device, by PetsMobility, is designed to snap onto a collar and auto-answer when a dog's owner calls. The owner can then talk to the dog, reassuring the animal. It also will have a call-back button, so if a dog is lost, whoever finds it can hit a button and call the owner.

The PetSafe Co. drew more than 5,000 entries to its recent IdeaFetch pet-product contest, and the winner was a collar that combines the need for ID on a pet with the convenience of using a computer for information updates.

The MicroID collar stores not only address and identifying information, but also medical records and required medication. The collar has a memory chip that is inserted into a computer's USB port for updating. Anyone who finds the pet can put the collar insert into his or her computer to access the information.

The winning entry brought its inventor, Jonathan Warren, a surfer from West Palm Beach, Fla., \$40,000, plus PetSafe's pledge to develop the product, which will be sold at PetCo for about \$30.

The PetSafe finalists also included the Pet Fire Alert Collar, which lights up and sounds off when smoke is detected, so firefighters can find pets in case of a fire.

Designer Gail Eicken, who worked as a volunteer EMT for 17 years, and her husband, Gary, a 25-year firefighter, developed the collar after seeing too many pets get trapped in a fire.

When a household smoke detector alarm sounds, the collar activates and produces a series of flashing lights and sounds.

"If it saves just one pet's life, it's worth it," said Eicken, who expects her product to be available within the next year.

Originally published on April 22, 2006