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Night Photo Colorizer: An Artificial Intelligence Application for Automated Chromatic Enhancement of Nocturnal Camera Trap Imagery

Christos Taklis

Merman Conservation Expeditions Ltd, Edinburgh, UK

***Corresponding author:** Christos Taklis, Merman Conservation Expeditions Ltd, Edinburgh, UK.

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Abstract

Camera trap night photography frequently suffers from limited colour depth, high noise levels, reduced contrast, and restricted visibility, thereby limiting its scientific value for documenting nocturnal wildlife. Night Photo Colorizer is an artificial intelligence application developed for the automatic colourization and enhancement of low illumination wildlife images. This communication evaluates its potential benefits and inherent limitations within ecological research contexts. The application enhances perceptual detail, improves edge definition, and increases overall visual clarity, supporting species identification and contextual habitat interpretation. It further enables projects relying on low-cost infrared or monochrome trail cameras to produce visually enriched outputs, potentially expanding research capacity in resource-constrained regions. However, colour reconstruction in extremely dark images remains inferential. The system may generate false chromatic information, introduce visually plausible but inaccurate anatomical features, or misrepresent environmental lighting conditions. Such alterations can lead to interpretative bias if enhanced images are treated as primary evidence without reference to the original unprocessed data. Careful validation, retention of raw imagery, and transparent methodological reporting are therefore essential to avoid erroneous scientific conclusions.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Trap Camera Research, Night Photography, Image Enhancement, Low-cost Technology.

Introduction

Camera traps are widely employed in contemporary wildlife research because they enable the non-invasive documentation of elusive and nocturnal species without direct human presence [1, 2]. By operating autonomously in remote or difficult terrain, these systems allow consistent monitoring while minimizing disturbance, making them particularly valuable for studying secretive, rare, or behaviourally sensitive taxa [2]. Over the past decade, camera trap deployment has expanded substantially, supporting large-scale biodiversity monitoring programs and long-term ecological research initiatives [3]. Their importance is especially pronounced for mammals, many of which exhibit crepuscular or nocturnal activity patterns and actively avoid human disturbance.

Beyond species detection, camera traps contribute significantly to biodiversity assessments, population estimation, activity pattern analysis, behavioural ecology, and conservation management [2, 3]. Infrared-triggered systems have become standard tools in protected areas and research programs worldwide due to their versatility and relatively low invasiveness [1]. However, despite their strengths, several methodological and technical constraints limit their effectiveness, particularly under low-light conditions.

Nocturnal camera trap imagery is frequently characterized by reduced image quality resulting from limited illumination, infrared-only capture modes, and sensor limitations. Studies focusing on nighttime wildlife detection have documented challenges, including low contrast, occlusion, scale variation, and general degradation in visual clarity under infrared conditions [4]. These constraints complicate automated object detection and manual species identification alike. Earlier assessments of infrared camera systems have similarly noted limitations related to image identification accuracy and environmental sensitivity [1], while broader reviews acknowledge that photographic data quality can be affected by placement, environmental exposure, and hardware constraints [2]. Collectively, these issues may reduce interpretability and compromise the scientific value of certain nocturnal records, particularly when fine morphological detail or subtle behaviours must be distinguished.

Although high-performance camera trap systems with enhanced low-light sensitivity are commercially available, the scaling of camera trap research has revealed practical bottlenecks associated with data processing, hardware capacity, and analytical workload [3]. Many projects, especially community-based initiatives, student-led research, and conservation programs operating in resource-limited settings, depend on affordable infrared or monochrome devices that may produce lower-quality nocturnal outputs. Even in well-funded contexts, researchers report reaching saturation points in image processing capacity, limiting the full analytical exploitation of collected data [3].

In response to these challenges, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) approaches are increasingly integrated into wildlife monitoring workflows. AI-powered camera trap systems have demonstrated substantial improvements in detection accuracy and reductions in manual processing time, including under nocturnal conditions [5]. Similarly, advances in deep learning-based object detection models have been shown to enhance feature saliency and improve performance on nighttime wildlife imagery [4]. Broader reviews further highlight the growing role of machine learning in addressing image identification bottlenecks and enabling large-scale ecological data analysis [2, 3].

Artificial intelligence-based image enhancement represents a potential strategy to mitigate limitations in nocturnal imagery without requiring substantial investment in new hardware. Computational approaches that improve contrast, tonal differentiation, and feature saliency may increase the interpretability of otherwise degraded images, thereby expanding the accessibility and inclusivity of wildlife monitoring efforts. However, AI-driven enhancement relies on probabilistic inference rather than direct optical capture. As emphasized in broader discussions of AI integration in wildlife research, responsible implementation requires careful validation, data standardization, and methodological transparency [2, 3]. Enhancement algorithms may introduce artefactual textures, altered tonal gradients, or biologically inaccurate visual cues if applied without critical oversight.

Night Photo Colorizer is an artificial intelligence application developed to automatically enhance colour perception, reduce noise, and improve contrast in severely underexposed camera trap photographs. By reconstructing tonal gradients and refining texture definition, the system seeks to increase the interpretability of images that would otherwise remain difficult to analyse. Nevertheless, because such enhancement processes involve algorithmic reconstruction rather than direct environmental measurement, their outputs must be interpreted cautiously. Rigorous evaluation is therefore necessary before AI-enhanced imagery is incorporated into ecological inference, species identification, or behavioural analysis.

Materials and Methods

Image Processing Procedure

A series of nocturnal camera trap photographs was processed using the Night Photo Colorizer application operating in fully automatic mode. No secondary software, manual correction, parameter adjustment, or post-processing intervention was applied. All analyses were conducted on original digital files exported directly from the camera trap devices. This ensured that observed outputs reflected the intrinsic performance of the application without user-mediated influence, consistent with reproducibility principles in camera trap methodology [6].

Original metadata, file structure, and naming conventions were preserved throughout the workflow to maintain traceability between raw and processed versions. Maintaining data provenance and audit trails is considered essential in wildlife monitoring studies to ensure transparency and defensibility of analytical workflows [7].

Image Selection and Sampling Strategy

Images were selected according to predefined inclusion criteria to ensure a representative and unbiased assessment of performance. The establishment of explicit inclusion criteria before analysis is recommended to reduce subjective bias in camera trap research [8].

Eligible photographs met the following conditions:

- Captured by autonomous camera traps operating without artificial illumination other than the device's integrated infrared system
- Recorded exclusively during nighttime hours as verified by embedded metadata
- Containing at least one wildlife subject identifiable in the original unprocessed frame
- Representing a gradient of illumination intensity, ranging from moderately visible subjects to severely underexposed and near pitch-black scenes
- Including diverse environmental contexts such as open understory, dense forest structure, mixed vegetation, and constrained movement corridors

No images were excluded based on anticipated enhancement quality or predicted outcome. This prevented preferential selection bias and aligns with best-practice recommendations for unbiased sampling in wildlife monitoring studies [9].

Only unedited original files were used. Duplicate frames derived from burst sequences were excluded to avoid redundancy and artificial inflation of sample size, a precaution commonly applied in camera trap data standardization protocols [10].

Processing Protocol

Each selected image was individually uploaded to the Night Photo Colorizer interface and processed using the default automated enhancement configuration. The application implemented a proprietary reconstruction sequence incorporating exposure normalization, noise attenuation, chromatic inference, local contrast refinement, sharpening, and tonal balancing.

Batch processing, iterative reprocessing, or multiple render passes were not performed to prevent cumulative artificial modification. Avoiding repeated algorithmic manipulation is consistent with broader recommendations in digital imaging science to limit artefact propagation and compounded reconstruction bias [11].

Original file names, timestamps, and metadata were preserved to maintain full traceability between raw and enhanced versions. Clear linkage between original and derived data products is considered fundamental to scientific image integrity standards [12].

Evaluation Criteria

Original and processed images were examined comparatively by the investigator according to predefined qualitative assessment parameters:

- Biological plausibility of inferred colour tones
- Degree of noise reduction in both subject and background regions
- Improvement or deterioration of observable anatomical characteristics, including pelage texture, feather structure, limb definition, cranial profile, tail morphology, and ocular reflection
- Preservation of environmental integrity, including vegetation structure, substrate characteristics, water surfaces, and sky regions
- Emergence of artificial artefacts, such as fabricated chromatic information, unrealistic texturing, distorted morphological proportions, or background elements resembling false anatomical structures

Assessment criteria were defined before image review to minimize retrospective interpretation bias. Structured qualitative evaluation frameworks are frequently applied in camera trap validation studies when quantitative metrics are not feasible [8].

Misinterpretation risk was recorded when enhancement altered phenotypic traits in a manner that could influence species identification, or when reconstructed lighting conditions implied ecologically inaccurate scenarios. The potential for image manipulation to introduce misleading visual information has been widely discussed in scientific imaging literature, particularly in contexts where processed imagery may influence interpretation [12, 13].

Ethical and Scientific Reliability Considerations

In accordance with established scientific imaging principles, enhanced outputs were treated exclusively as secondary visualization aids. Species identification, behavioural interpretation, and ecological inference were derived solely from the unmodified original images.

Camera trap methodology emphasizes that photographic records serve as primary data and should not be altered in ways that compromise evidentiary reliability [6]. Accordingly, enhanced versions were used only to demonstrate the potential advantages and limitations of artificial intelligence-based reconstruction.

All processed images were clearly labelled to prevent their use as standalone evidentiary material in biodiversity reporting, population assessment, forensic documentation, or species verification. The application was evaluated strictly as a visualization support tool rather than a substitute for raw data acquisition.

The study design intentionally emphasized transparency, traceability, and methodological restraint to minimize the risk of visual misinformation generated by artificial intelligence in wildlife research contexts.

Results

Positive Enhancement Outcomes

Across a heterogeneous set of nocturnal camera trap images, Night Photo Colorizer produced consistent improvements in perceptual clarity and structural definition under low to moderate illumination conditions (Fig 1). Enhanced images exhibited clearer subject delineation against background vegetation, improved edge contrast, and increased tonal separation between foreground and surrounding habitat.

Anatomical features that were poorly resolved in the original infrared frames became more distinguishable following processing. These included pelage texture gradients, limb positioning, tail curvature, cranial contours, and ocular reflections. In several cases, the clarification of fur density patterns and body proportions facilitated more confident recognition of diagnostic morphological traits.

Noise attenuation was evident across both subject and background regions. High-frequency luminance artefacts typical of infrared night photography were reduced, resulting in smoother vegetation gradients and improved visibility of understory structure. This reduction in visual interference enhanced the interpretability of animal posture and spatial orientation within the habitat context.

Under moderately degraded illumination conditions, colour inference appeared biologically plausible. Reconstructed chromatic information generally followed expected ecological patterns, such as brown tonal gradients in wild boar pelage and muted earth tones in forest substrates. Although these colours were inferential rather than optically captured, they did not substantially conflict with known species morphology in well-defined frames.

Collectively, these findings indicate that artificial intelligence-based enhancement can extend the practical usability of images generated by low-cost sensor systems. For research programs operating with limited resources, the application may increase documentation clarity without requiring hardware replacement.

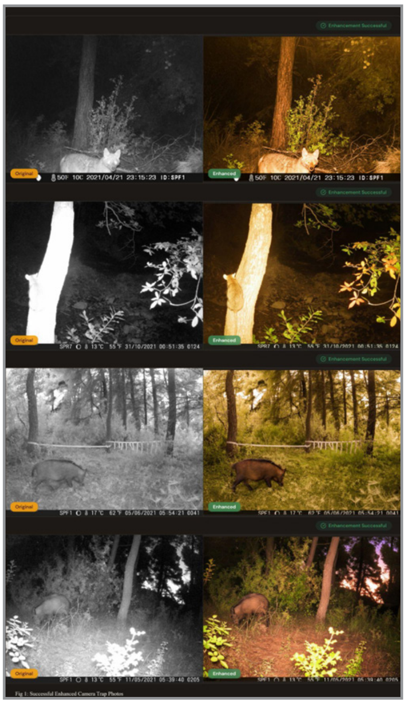

Figure 1

Negative Enhancement Outcomes

Artificial reconstruction artefacts were most pronounced in images characterized by extremely low illumination and minimal recoverable signal. In such cases, the enhancement process produced synthetic visual information that exceeded the constraints of the original data (Fig 2).

Observed artefacts included fabricated chromatic regions, exaggerated sharpening along indistinct boundaries, and locally inconsistent texture reconstruction. In certain instances, morphological proportions were subtly altered. For example, one processed image of an adult golden jackal exhibited artificial reddish tonal shifts combined with a visually elongated muzzle profile. The resulting phenotype bore resemblance to a red fox, despite the original grayscale morphology being consistent with golden jackal structure. Such alterations demonstrate the potential for enhanced outputs to influence species-level perception if interpreted in isolation.

Environmental misrepresentation was also documented. In a nocturnal forest scene captured during early morning hours, vegetation and the animal subject were reconstructed with relatively plausible nighttime coloration. However, a canopy gap was interpreted algorithmically as a bright orange horizon resembling sunset illumination. This introduced a false temporal cue into an otherwise nocturnal scene. The artificial sky patch altered the environmental narrative of the image without affecting the remainder of the frame.

These results demonstrate that enhancement artefacts may not uniformly degrade the entire image. Instead, partially realistic composites can emerge, in which credible anatomical reconstruction coexists with fabricated environmental or phenotypic elements. This selective plausibility increases interpretative risk because misleading components may not be immediately obvious.

Overall, error frequency and severity were strongly associated with signal scarcity in the original image. The lower the recoverable tonal information, the greater the degree of algorithmic inference and the higher the probability of biologically inaccurate reconstruction.

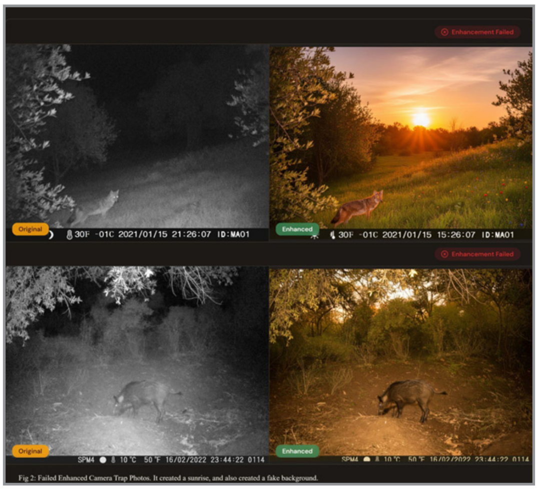

Figure 2

Discussion

The application of artificial intelligence-based colour enhancement to nocturnal camera trap imagery demonstrates that digital reconstruction tools can improve visual interpretability without replacing original scientific evidence. In many instances, enhancement increased subject–background contrast, clarified pelage and feather microstructures, and strengthened structural delineation. These improvements align with broader findings that artificial intelligence systems can substantially assist wildlife image interpretation and classification tasks while maintaining reliance on primary photographic data [14, 15].

Enhanced interpretability may be particularly valuable for communication purposes, including ecological reporting, conservation outreach, and educational dissemination. Machine learning tools are increasingly recognized as supportive technologies in biodiversity workflows, augmenting rather than substituting expert evaluation [16]. Within this framework, colour enhancement functions as a visualization aid that may extend the communicative value of otherwise low-clarity nocturnal imagery.

Implications for Low-Resource Conservation Programs

The ability to enhance low-quality imagery has meaningful implications for wildlife monitoring initiatives operating under financial or infrastructural constraints. Many conservation programs, particularly in biodiverse but underfunded regions, rely on low-cost camera trap systems that generate reduced image clarity under nocturnal infrared conditions. Artificial intelligence tools that increase the usability of these images may help democratize access to visually informative wildlife documentation.

Citizen science initiatives and community-based biodiversity programs have demonstrated that distributed participation can substantially expand ecological data collection capacity [17]. The integration of AI-assisted tools into such workflows may further reduce technical barriers and enhance engagement, particularly where expert validation capacity is limited. Large-scale collaborative projects have shown that technological augmentation can improve data throughput and accessibility while maintaining ecological rigor when appropriate safeguards are applied [10].

By improving the communicative clarity of images produced by inexpensive equipment, AI enhancement may help reduce geographic and economic disparities in biodiversity documentation. However, its implementation must remain coupled with transparent methodological standards to prevent unintended interpretative distortions.

Considerations for Scientific Reliability

Despite the demonstrated benefits, artificial intelligence-based reconstruction introduces epistemic risks. Enhancement algorithms do not recover optically captured biological truth; instead, they infer probable visual structures from incomplete or degraded signals. Studies in automated wildlife image classification have documented the susceptibility of AI systems to domain shifts, misclassification, and feature hallucination when confronted with atypical or low-quality inputs. Under conditions of extreme darkness and minimal recoverable tonal information, algorithmic inference may exceed evidentiary constraints. The observed transformation of a golden jackal into a fox-like phenotype and the artificial introduction of sunset-like coloration into a nocturnal scene illustrate how plausible but fabricated features can emerge. Similar concerns have been raised regarding uncertainty and error propagation in ecological deep learning applications.

Such artefacts are particularly consequential in contexts requiring high evidentiary standards, including rare species verification, invasive species detection, population assessments, and conservation status documentation. Because AI-generated enhancements may selectively alter specific anatomical or environmental components while leaving others realistic, misleading features may not be immediately detectable. This selective plausibility increases interpretative risk compared to uniformly degraded imagery.

Preservation of Original Photographic Records

These findings reinforce that only unmodified trap camera photographs constitute primary scientific evidence. Reproducibility and transparency are foundational principles of scientific integrity, particularly in computationally mediated workflows [18, 19]. Enhanced images, while potentially useful for visualization, should remain supplementary representations that reference original files.

The necessity of maintaining raw data integrity is especially critical when reporting rare species occurrences, novel distribution records, or unique behavioural observations. Broader concerns regarding reliability in scientific research highlight the importance of traceable primary evidence and cautious interpretation of derived outputs [20].

Accordingly, AI-processed images should be clearly labelled, and journals and research institutions should require submission of original, unaltered photographic files when enhanced images are presented. Such policies would ensure that interpretative claims remain grounded in verifiable data rather than algorithmically reconstructed approximations.

Future Directions for AI in Conservation Imaging

Artificial intelligence systems are evolving rapidly, and their reliability in ecological imaging applications is expected to improve. Emerging research emphasizes the development of more robust, interpretable, and uncertainty-aware AI models capable of quantifying confidence levels in generated outputs [21, 22]. Incorporating uncertainty estimation into enhancement workflows may allow users to identify frames where reconstruction reliability is low.

Ethical and technical safeguards could further mitigate misuse. These may include standardized labelling protocols, embedded metadata indicating AI processing history, non-reconstructive enhancement modes, and automated warnings when signal scarcity exceeds defined thresholds. Broader discussions in AI safety research underscore the importance of aligning technological advancement with responsible deployment frameworks [23]. With continued methodological refinement and appropriate governance structures, AI-enhanced imagery may become a valuable communication and supplementary analytical tool within wildlife monitoring. However, its integration into conservation science must preserve the primacy of original photographic data as the evidentiary foundation of ecological inference.

Conclusion

Night Photo Colorizer enhances the interpretability of low-cost trap camera images, providing meaningful support for research programs operating under financial constraints. In moderately dark conditions, it clarifies anatomical features, improves shape recognition, and facilitates basic ecological interpretation. For outreach and public communication, it generates visually accessible material that can engage non-specialists in wildlife monitoring efforts.

In extremely degraded light, the tool may introduce false colours, artificial textures, or features not present in the original scene. These artifacts can compromise species recognition and behavioural interpretation if treated as scientific evidence. Therefore, AI enhancement should be considered an auxiliary resource that supports communication and preliminary observations, not a replacement for unprocessed photographic data. Responsible practice requires that all AI-enhanced images are explicitly labelled and never serve as proof for rare sightings, new records, or behavioural claims without confirmation from original imagery. Scientific credibility depends on leveraging the strengths of AI enhancement while acknowledging its limitations.

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Field observations and trap camera data were collected during routine wildlife monitoring in coastal and forested areas of South Pelion, Greece. We extend our gratitude to local landowners for permitting camera placement.

Ethical Compliance Statement

The authors confirm that this manuscript is an original work and has not been previously published nor submitted for consideration elsewhere. All text, data, and illustrative material are free from plagiarism and appropriately attributed where necessary.

The authors declare that there are no financial or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the research presented in this manuscript. Any institutional affiliations relevant to tool development have been transparently disclosed in the Disclosure and Development Statement.

This study did not involve human participants, experimental animal handling, invasive procedures, or the collection of sensitive personal data. The imagery analysed was obtained through non-invasive wildlife camera trap monitoring conducted in accordance with applicable national and regional environmental regulations. Camera deployment was observational in nature and did not involve direct interaction with wildlife.

Where camera placement occurred on privately owned land, permission was obtained from landholders before installation. No identifying human subjects appear in the dataset analysed in this study.

As the research relied exclusively on retrospective analysis of non-invasive photographic records collected during routine ecological monitoring, formal ethics committee approval and informed consent procedures were not required under applicable institutional or national guidelines.

The authors affirm adherence to recognised principles of responsible scientific conduct, transparency in reporting, and preservation of primary data.

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