

Ethical Birding Guidelines

1. Purpose

The purpose of these Guidelines is to increase awareness of potential negative impacts that recreational bird watching may have on birds. The document seeks to guide staff, members and volunteers of BirdLife Australia and members of the general public who have an interest in birds and the environment. It is intended that these guidelines will also assist commercial tour operators and volunteer group leaders to develop activities which minimise any negative impacts on birds while seeking to enhance the experience of their participants.

'Birding' here is used to refer to recreational activities involving wild birds, for example bird watching or photography.

2. Rationale

Recreational bird watching and associated tourist activities can have negative impacts on the environment. Often these impacts are unintended or are the result of lack of awareness. BirdLife Australia believes it can play a major role in ameliorating or avoiding these negative impacts by providing advice, setting ethical standards and educating the public on these issues.

3. Principles

Promote the welfare of birds and their habitat

Support the protection of birds and their habitat

It is important for birders to recognise their role in ensuring their favourite birds are still around to be appreciated by future generations. By respecting, supporting and advocating for the protection of bird habitat, birders play an essential part in the ongoing survival of bird species. For more information, please refer to the Birdlife Australia Native Vegetation and Connectivity Policies.

Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger

Birders should keep an appropriate distance from all birds they observe. Where possible, stay on marked trails and avoid entering restricted areas, no matter how tempting it may be to venture closer. Disturbing a bird's feeding area or nesting sites can cause stress and fear that may drive the bird into an area where it is more vulnerable to predators.

Exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording or filming. Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds and avoid using such methods in heavily birded areas or for attracting any species listed as Threatened or known to be rare in your local area. Keep well back from nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display areas and important feeding sites. In such sensitive areas, if there is an intension of extended observation, photography, filming, or recording, try to use a blind or hide, and take advantage of natural cover.

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There are many useful birding tools that can bring birders close to the species they observe without interacting with the birds. Zoom camera lenses, binoculars and spotting scopes are useful options. A bit of patience on the part of the birder will help the bird to feel more secure about the birder's presence and it may venture closer on its own.

Call playback

The use of call playback can distress some species and may disrupt feeding and/or breeding activity. As a general rule, BirdLife Australia does not support the use of call playback for the purposes of bird observation. However, if artificial bird calls are to be used they should be used for limited periods and be played at a volume lower than that of the target bird. It should not be used during the target bird's breeding season.

The use of such devices should always be kept to a minimum, particularly in areas of high visitation by birders where call playback by other birders may well have occurred in the recent past. Responsible use of call playback can be valuable in locating cryptic birds without causing serious harm; however, it is a skilled activity and should not be taken lightly. If in doubt, avoid using call playback, particularly during nesting season when birds may be called off incubation duties, or even abandon the nest altogether.

Flushing

While any interaction with birds runs the risk that they will occasionally startle and fly off, BirdLife Australia believes it is unacceptable to deliberately flush birds in order to get a good view of the underwing or any other part of the bird not usually seen. Repeatedly flushing birds can mean they use up vital energy needed for other activities such as feeding and can place the bird under undue stress.

Spotlighting

Spotlighting disturbs birds and animals which may be sleeping or resting and may interfere with the night sight of nocturnal species. Using a spotlight near a nest may also cause birds to abandon their nest or the young to fall. It is recommended that birders adopt a precautionary approach and if necessary, keep the time that a bird is held in the spotlight to a minimum i.e. for seconds rather than minutes. The use of lower intensity spotlights, red filters and directing the light to the side of the subject will help reduce the discomfort to the bird.

Photography

Bird photography provides a way of increasing public appreciation and understanding of birds and their habitat as well as providing enjoyment and satisfaction to the photographer. However, it may present additional problems which are specific to the activity.

- The wellbeing of the bird must be the main concern and every effort should be made to ensure that the bird is not stressed in any way.
- Particular care is required when photographing nesting birds which may abandon the nest as a result of disturbance caused by the erection of hides and other equipment, by too frequent visits to the nest site or by the sounds and flash of the camera.
- Photographers should not 'garden' the area around the nest by removing branches or other objects which may block a clear view of the nest as this will increase the exposure of the nesting birds to the weather and to predation.
- There are no circumstances where modification to the nest or its approaches in order to force the bird into a more photogenic position is acceptable.
- Photographers should keep a close watch on their subject and look for signs of distress. Lingering too long in a bird's core territory can cause undue stress and may result in nest abandonment.
- Photographers should use artificial light sparingly for filming or photography, especially for close-ups.

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Avoid handling birds

Birders should never physically touch a bird without extreme cause. While it may be necessary to move an injured bird to a safe location or to help relocate fledglings that fall from a nest, it is always best to avoid touching birds. If it is necessary to touch or move birds in dangerous situations or birds that have sustained injuries, they should be handled as little as possible. Wear gloves to limit the risk of bacterial or viral contamination and quickly put the bird in a safe, calm area where they can recuperate naturally.

Rare bird sightings

It is natural for a birder to want to share the exciting discovery of a new nest, a rare bird species or an unknown birding site, but doing so could result in increased stress to the birds.

The location of nesting sites of rare species or species of conservation significance should only be divulged to relevant conservation authorities.

BirdLife Australia encourages birders to carefully consider the consequences of attracting large numbers of birders to sensitive areas. Birds are naturally shy and can easily be disturbed by a sudden increase in human presence, even if birders practice good birding ethics.

Habitat disturbance

Avoid leaving litter along a birding trail, and do not move dead branches, brush or tree limbs in order to see birds more clearly—move your body instead to find a better observational angle. Stay on roads, trails, and paths where they exist; and otherwise keep habitat disturbance to a minimum.

Respect the law and the rights of others

Do not enter private property without the owner's explicit permission

It is important that birders respect the rights of private land owners and seek permission prior to entering private property. When birders enter an area without permission from the appropriate landholder they can damage relations between the owner and the entire birding and conservation communities. This can have a direct conservation impact by denying researchers access to important habitats, and creates a negative view of birders that can undo years of community bridge-building work. So please, always seek permission before entering property to view or photograph birds.

Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas, both in Australia and abroad

Remember that indigenous traditional lands may be subject to additional regulations and respect the rights of traditional owners to care for their land. Regardless of the location, always obey the laws which govern access to the area being visited.

When driving in wet conditions, birders should also be aware of the damage that can result from driving on dirt roads or tracks. Many roads may not be signposted as "dry weather only", but the damage done by vehicles can create ill-will from landholders, land managers and locals as well as have an impact on habitat quality through excess run-off from the road surface.

Practice common courtesy in interactions with other people

Birding is one of the most popular hobbies in the world, and an ethical birder is a polite one. When visiting popular birding locations, share the best views with other birders and avoid any behaviour that may disrupt birds or distract other birders. Keep conversation to a minimum, turn off mobile phones and avoid using flash photography that may disturb birds or other birders' viewing devices.

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4. Group Birding Ethics

BirdLife Australia believes that both commercial and volunteer tour group operators have a responsibility to promote ethical birding and to educate their participants on issues pertaining to bird conservation.

Lead by example and know your audience

Follow and promote these Guidelines and encourage participants to do the same. Before setting out on an excursion, find out the level of knowledge and experience within the group you are leading. This will provide a good platform to promote the principles of ethical birding and to publicise the issues pertaining to bird conservation at a level commensurate to the group.

Report bird sightings

Commercial tour operators and volunteer guides should take advantage of their repeated visits to a particular location to contribute information to ornithological databases and ongoing studies. The BirdLife Australia Atlas is the best example of such a database in Australia - birdata.com.au. These people are also in an ideal position to see and report problems which affect the survival of birds and their livelihood, e.g. illegal bird trapping or environmental degradation.

Impart knowledge

In order to provide a satisfying experience for all participants without damaging the location being visited, group leaders should:

- seek to impart accurate information to participants in such a way that appreciation and respect for the places visited is enhanced;
- educate participants on the importance of following the ethical birding principles;
- promote an understanding of the area visited and the issues which affect the management and long-term protection of the area; and
- help participants understand the factors that have resulted in rare or endangered species having small and/or limited populations and ranges and what is necessary to ensure the long-term survival of the species.

Get involved

When the opportunity arises, the tour operator or volunteer leader should also seek to:

- involve participants in activities which have a positive impact on the location being visited (e.g. voluntary conservation work);
- encourage participants to record observations, which may contribute to the overall understanding of the area being visited; and
- use local businesses to provide services for the tour group; if you are seen to be supporting local services, you give local communities an additional incentive to conserve their natural environment.

Consider the birds

Group leaders and tour operators bear a special responsibility to place the welfare of birds and the benefits of public knowledge ahead of a company's commercial interests or group's individual bird watching needs. Ideally, leaders should keep track of tour sightings, document unusual occurrences, and submit records to appropriate organisations.

Limit group sizes to reduce the impact on the environment and do not interfere with others using the same area.

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Ethical Birding

Factsheet for Birders

Promote the welfare of birds and their environment

- Support the protection of birds and their habitat
- Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger
- Avoid using methods such as flushing, spotlighting and call playback, particularly during nesting season when birds may be called off incubation duties, or even abandon the nest altogether
- Be aware of the impact photography can have on birds- avoid lingering around nests or core territories for long periods and limit the use of artificial light
- Avoid handling birds
- Report rare bird sightings to conservation authorities and consider the wellbeing of the bird before making this knowledge more publically available
- Stay on roads, trails, and paths where they exist- avoid leaving litter along a birding trail and otherwise keep habitat disturbance to a minimum

Respect the law and the rights of others

- Do not enter private property without the owner's explicit permission
- Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas
- Consider and respect the rights of landholders
- Practice common courtesy in interactions with other people

Group Birding Ethics

- Lead by example and know your audience – encourage others to employ ethical birding practices
- Report bird sightings – all data are useful to bird conservation and wherever possible, should be reported to ornithological databases such as the BirdLife Australia database - birdata.com.au
- Impart knowledge – share what you know about birds and their habitats
- Get involved – encourage birders to engage local communities and get involved in conservation initiatives at their favourite birding locations
- Consider the birds – always put the health and wellbeing of birds first- consider the impact you as an individual and the group are having on birds and their environment

For more information, please refer to the complete BirdLife Australia Ethical Birding Guidelines

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