

Ethical Birding Guidelines for General BirdLife Projects and activities, Individuals and Tourism operators

1. Purpose

The purpose of these Guidelines is to increase awareness of potential negative impacts that recreational, or commercial bird watching and photography may have on birds and their habitats. 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' and 'bird watching' 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 the result of a lack of awareness. BirdLife Australia 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

The welfare of birds and their habitat always comes first

3.1 Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger

Birders should keep an appropriate distance from all birds they observe, noting that some species are more disturbance prone than others. 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 cause nest/chick failure directly or 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 call playback 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 intention of extended observation, photography, filming, or sound recording, try to use a blind or hide, and take advantage of natural cover. For some species with highly camouflaged eggs/chick and passive nest/chick defence behaviours, you may not even be aware you are near breeding birds. For these species, avoiding any approach during the breeding season is advised.

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.

3.2 Call playback

With the advance of smartphones and bird guide apps with bird calls the use of call playback has become very easy. It is important to recognise that call playback can distress target birds and other species and may disrupt feeding and/or breeding activity. As a rule, BirdLife Australia does not support the use of call playback for the purposes of recreational bird observation or photography. In particular, playback should not be used in areas that get visited frequently by birders using playback. 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. Its use may require ethics and other permits, especially for threatened or rare species and during the breeding season where population level in addition to individual impacts are more likely. Permit specifics may vary but will include limits on time to short periods e.g. < 5min and brief snippets of 30 seconds or less, and on volume to be quieter than the bird's natural call volume.

3.3 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.

3.4 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.

3.5 Drones (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles)

Drones are used creating new opportunities for bird observation. Because this technology has only become accessible in recent years, data on their impacts on birds are limited and a precautionary approach is advised. Comply with relevant civil aviation rules, which includes considerations such as proximity to airports and other people (www.casa.gov.au/aircraft/landing-page/flying-drones-australia). Also comply with local regulations regarding their use on public land and certain infrastructure; use of drones in National Parks, for example, is prohibited. Avoid the use of drones for bird observation in areas visited frequently by birders or the general public and for species listed as Threatened or known to be rare locally. Do not fly drones near nests or nesting colonies unless you have fully considered the risks to the target birds and other species and have received ethics approval; for instance advanced chicks may jump from the nest and adults may be killed or injured in aerial nest defence. Ensure drone design with regard to shape, size and movement does not mimic a threat to birds. If you notice the drone causes distress to birds, wildlife or other people, end the flight.

3.6 Photography

Bird photography provides a way of increasing public appreciation and understanding of birds and their habitat, provides enjoyment and satisfaction to the photographer and contributes to BirdLife Australia's conservation project work where it is done under strict guidance and with appropriate training. Photography also presents additional problems which are specific to the activity.

- Photographers should keep a close watch on their subject and look for signs of distress, such as alarm calls, “broken wing displays” or “crouching”. Linger too long in a bird’s core territory can cause stress and even nest abandonment. Photographing nesting shorebirds and seabirds should be avoided.
- Photographers should use artificial light sparingly, especially for close-ups.
- While some birds are seemingly oblivious to observers and photographers e.g. sunbirds nesting on the deck, photography at the nest should be avoided as it can attract predators or spook adults and chicks. No modifications to the nest or its immediate surroundings should be made.
- Photographers should be aware of potential predators watching them and the bird/s they are photographing. Their presence, prolonged observation and potential flushing of birds can alert a predator to prey.
- Photographers should be conscious of how long they in proximity to their bird subject. During the breeding season of birds, photographers should limit time spent with a given subject, as they could be keeping the bird/s from returning to the nest or chicks.
- Specific ethical photography guidelines are also provided by the BirdLife Photography Group <http://birdlifephotography.org.au/index.php/about-us/our-policies>

3.7 Avoid handling birds

Birders should never touch a bird without extreme cause. It may be necessary to move an injured bird off the road or to help relocate fledglings that fall from a nest. For precocial chicks: do not touch and immediately leave the area near these chicks. If you cannot gently chase the bird out of harm’s way, hold a bird by its body not by its limbs and never put pressure on a bird’s chest. Ensure your own safety as some birds can inflict serious wounds, carry germs or are in dangerous locations e.g. on the road. Handle the birds as little as possible and put them in a safe, calm area to recuperate.

3.8 Rare bird sightings

It is natural 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 expects birders to 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.

3.9 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.

3.10 Feeding

The effects of providing artificial food on Australian native birds are still a matter of quantitative research. As a precaution BirdLife Australia therefore recommends to refrain from feeding birds to avoid exposing birds to unhealthy foods, diseases or predation especially at regular feeding sites.

3.11 Watering

Australian birds regularly take advantage of natural and artificial water sources which can provide great places for bird watching. Make sure that your presence does not prevent birds from accessing water. If you maintain an artificial watering point ensure it is kept clean and not easily accessible to predators and is not a drowning hazard especially for young birds by placing a rock etc. in the water basin as a way out.

3.12 Report bird sightings

Individuals, commercial tour operators, environmental consultants and volunteer guides should take advantage of their (repeat) visits to a particular location to contribute information to ornithological databases and ongoing studies. However, care needs to be taken not to disclose the locations of sensitive species or attract fellow birders to locations not accessible without permission or that are unsafe e.g. private property or military training areas. BirdLife Australia's <https://birddata.birdlife.org.au> is the best example of such a database in Australia. Unlike some other databases it also automatically prevents disclosure of location data for species of conservation concern. You can also request your data to be kept from public view. During your visit you may also come across problems which affect the survival of birds and their habitat, e.g. illegal bird trapping or environmental degradation. Please report these to conservation@birdlife.org.au

Respect the law and the rights of others – Be an advocate for bird conservation and birding

3.13 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 landholder they can damage relations between the owner and the entire birding and conservation communities. This applies explicitly also to traditionally owned lands. So please, always seek permission before entering property to view or photograph birds.

3.14 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. Hot engines especially those of petrol cars can spark bush-fires so avoid pulling off the road into dry grass. No official BirdLife Australia outdoor activities are permitted on days and in areas affected by a 'Total Fire Ban'.

3.15 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'.

4. Group Birding Ethics

BirdLife Australia believes that both commercial and volunteer tour leaders have a responsibility to promote ethical birding and to educate participants on bird conservation. We expect BirdLife Australia branches and affiliates as well as commercial operators using our services (e.g. for advertising or data) to uphold these ethical standards.

4.1 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.

4.2 Impart knowledge

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 especially in Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), the areas that matter most for birds and wildlife www.birdlife.org.au/kba
- 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 led to the small populations and ranges of endangered species and what can be done to ensure their long-term survival

4.3 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 to give local communities an additional incentive to conserve their natural environment.

4.4 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 a group's or individual's 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.

Ethical Birding

Summary factsheet for Individuals and Tour operators

The welfare of birds always comes first

- Do not stress birds or expose them to danger (e.g. through flushing)
- Minimize the use and impact of methods such as spotlighting and call playback (30 sec bouts in 5 min total activity). Avoid them during nesting season and for rare and threatened species
- In bird photography, avoid lingering around nests or core territories, favourite feeding or drinking sites and limit the use of artificial light
- Avoid handling birds (except in cases of extreme cause e.g. injured bird in danger)
- Report bird sightings, ensuring no sensitive data for threatened species goes public e.g. by reporting on sites with built-in safeguards e.g. <https://birddata.birdlife.org.au>
- Avoid feeding birds or providing inappropriate water sources

Care for the bird's habitat

- Stay on roads, trails, and paths where they exist especially in National parks, reserves and Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) www.birdlife.org.au/KBA
- Do not litter rather pick up litter along a birding trail and in bird habitat
- Keep habitat disturbance to a minimum
- Apply the same care to other wildlife as you would to birds

Respect the law and the rights of others

- Do not enter private property or Indigenous lands without explicit permission
- Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas
- Practice common courtesy in interactions with other people

Be an advocate for bird conservation and birding

- Lead by example and know your audience – encourage others in ethical birding
- Share your knowledge and love for birds to inspire their conservation
- Engage and support local communities and get involved in conservation
- Support BirdLife Australia <http://birdlife.org.au/support-us/join-us/>

The complete BirdLife Australia Ethical Birding Guidelines are here

<http://www.birdlife.org.au/documents/POL-Ethical-Birding-Guidelines.pdf>