

BirdLife Australia Ethical Birdwatching Guidelines

Summary factsheet

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 spotlighting and call playback especially during nesting season and for threatened birds. We discourage the use of call playback but if used do not exceed three 30 sec bouts in 5 min total at any one site.
- In bird photography, avoid lingering around nests or core territories, favourite feeding or drinking sites and limit the use of flashes
- Avoid handling birds (except in cases of extreme cause e.g. injured bird in danger)
- Help bird conservation by recording observations and standardised surveys. Make sure you keep sensitive data safe by using birddata.birdlife.org.au. If you use ebird.org, protect sensitive species by going online and choosing 'Hide Checklist' for threatened birds etc.
- When providing food or water for native birds ensure this is done safely and appropriately for the birds. Artificial feeding cannot replace habitat protection.

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) birdlife.org.au/KBA
- Do not litter; rather pick up litter in bird habitat to inspire others to care
- Keep habitat disturbance and modification to a minimum
- Apply the same care to other fauna and flora as you do 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

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 below

standing together to stop extinctions

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BirdLife Australia Ethical Birdwatching Guidelines

For birders, BirdLife activities, research and tour operators
August 2020

Birdwatching is a wonderful activity to experience nature in a gentle, exciting and fulfilling way and has driven many scientific and conservation efforts. Nonetheless, it can have negative impacts on birds and other wildlife. BirdLife Australia works to reduce such impacts by providing these ethical birding guidelines standards and education.

The purpose of our Guidelines is to raise awareness of potential negative impacts that recreational, or professional bird watching and photography can have on birds and their habitats. The document seeks to guide staff, researchers, members and volunteers of BirdLife Australia and the general public to watch birds without harming them. These guidelines can also assist commercial tour operators and volunteer group leaders to develop activities which minimise any negative impacts on birds while enhancing the experience of their participants. Formal permits, ethics etc., may still be required for some activities and adherence to these guidelines may help with applications but does not replace the need to apply for such permits.

The welfare of birds and their habitat always comes first

Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger by your presence

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 especially in National parks, reserves and Key Biodiversity Areas www.birdlife.org.au/KBA and do not restricted areas. Disturbing bird feeding nesting sites can cause stress or drive birds into an area of greater predation and lead directly to nest/chick failure.

Exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording or filming. 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/chicks you may not even be aware of nearby breeding birds. For these species, avoid any approach during the breeding season.

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.

Avoid 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 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, e.g. hotspot locations to see rare species. Playback will not only stress the birds but is likely upsetting fellow birdwatchers. 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 in a research setting will require ethics and possibly other permits, especially for threatened or rare species and during the breeding season.

If you feel you need to use call playback for recreational birding against this advice, please: use playback for < 5min per site, for < 30 seconds at a time followed by a 1 minute break and at volumes below the bird's natural call volume.

Do not Flush birds

While any interaction with birds runs the risk that they will occasionally startle and fly off, it is unacceptable to deliberately flush birds to get a better view etc. Repeatedly flushing birds stresses them and uses up time and large amounts of energy needed for other activities.

Careful Spotlighting

Spotlighting disturbs birds at rest and may interfere with the night vision 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 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 reduces the discomfort to the bird. Consider using infrared binoculars or thermal imaging for your search.

Careful use of laser pointers

Laser pointers can be very useful in indicating the location of a bird. Only use laser pointers to indicate the tree or branch a bird is sitting on and never point it at the bird itself.

No drones for recreational birding

BirdLife Australia does not support the use of drones for recreational birdwatching and bird photography. If used for research purposes a specific ethics permit will be required as well as compliance with relevant civil aviation rules. This includes considerations such as proximity to airports and 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. 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.

Kind photography

Bird photography can increase public appreciation and understanding of birds and their habitat. It provides enjoyment and satisfaction to the photographer and can contribute to BirdLife Australia's conservation work e.g. by adding photographs to the Birddata app. Photography also creates additional threats specific to the activity. Full ethical photography guidelines are provided by the BirdLife Photography Group:

<http://birdlifephotography.org.au/index.php/about-us/our-policies>

- Photographers should keep a close watch on their subject and look for signs of distress, such as alarm calls, "broken wing displays" or "crouching" and leave when these occur.
- Lingering too long in a bird's territory can cause stress to the birds or their young during the breeding season. It can cause nest abandonment and may attract predators.
- Photographers should use artificial light sparingly, especially for close-ups.
- While some birds are seemingly oblivious to 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 surroundings should be made.

- 'Trophy' photography e.g. of an observer near a threatened bird can promote harmful behaviour towards birds and bring birding into disrepute. It is not endorsed by BirdLife.
- Avoid posting images, GPS points and content/data publicly about sensitive species and nest locations on digital platforms including social media, websites etc.
- Avoid posting images and content of rare and threatened species locations and nest obtained in restricted access or non-permitted areas on social media and websites.

Avoid handling birds

You may come across an injured or young bird you feel needs your help e.g. by taking it to a wildlife carer or vet or relocating a fledgling to its nest. Many such birds are better off left in peace to recuperate or attended to by their parents. This applies especially to precocial chicks, such as lapwings. Please do not touch these and immediately leave the area near the chicks so the parents can return. If you find a bird in harm's way first try to ease it to safety e.g. by herding it off a road. If you have to pick up a bird hold it by its body not by its limbs or head and never put pressure on its 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. Find more detail here www.birdsinbackyards.net/content/faq/What-do-I-do-if-I-find-sick-or-injured-bird

Rare bird sightings and twitching

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 stress to the birds and their habitat. In particular, the location of nesting sites of rare or threatened species should only be divulged to relevant conservation authorities and submitted to Birddata where such records are quarantined. If using ebird you can apply the 'Hide Checklist' function online.

BirdLife Australia expects birders to consider the consequences of attracting large numbers of birders to sensitive areas before making an observation public. Birds are naturally shy and can easily be disturbed by a sudden increase in human presence, even if birders practice good birding ethics. An influx of twitchers to a site can also damage the local environment for the resident species or promote trespassing on private property or Indigenous land.

Minimize habitat disturbance

Avoid leaving litter along a birding trail - rather pick it up a beautiful area is more likely respected by other visitors than a dump. Do not remove branches or brush 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; keep habitat disturbance to a minimum.

Feeding and Watering

Feeding responsibly

Specific BirdLife Australia guidelines for bird feeding are currently in preparation. BirdLife Australia's work is focussed on ensuring the birds' natural environment provides sufficient food to make artificial feeding unnecessary. However, we acknowledge that bird feeding for many people is a major way of engaging with birds and in extreme situations e.g. after the bushfires may even become essential to their survival. Feeding Australian native birds thus needs to be done responsibly and in accordance with local or state government regulations e.g. some councils have a no feeding policy. Appropriate food should be provided for each species in a hygienic way, safe from predators and without attracting and supporting pest species. Food should also be limited both in amount and timing to avoid unsustainable population densities. Further details can be found here:

www.birdsinbackyards.net/Supplementary-feeding-and-water-guides

Watering safely and hygienically

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 cleaned daily, is not easily accessible to predators and is not a drowning hazard by placing a rock etc. in the water basin as a way out. See here: www.birdsinbackyards.net/Supplementary-feeding-and-water-guides for more information.

Report bird sightings for science and conservation

Birdwatchers, volunteers, commercial tour operators, environmental consultants and volunteer guides are encouraged to contribute their observations to bird databases e.g. [birdata](http://birdata.birdlife.org.au)

[.birdlife.org.au](http://birdlife.org.au) . Standardised and repeated surveys from the same location create valuable data series. To keep sensitive species safe, Birdata automatically prevents disclosure of location data for them (birdata.birdlife.org.au/sensitive-species). It also lets you set records as private e.g. on private property. During your visit you may observe issues affecting the survival of birds and their habitat, e.g. illegal logging. Please report these to conservation@birdlife.org.au

Note: if using ebird.org you can submit (or set your past) surveys as standardised on the website. Choose Australia as your 'Region' then select the appropriate BirdLife survey method under 'Other' Observation Type. For sensitive species, please select 'Hide Checklist' to avoid putting them at risk by disclosing their locations.

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

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 the correct permissions prior to entering private property. Entering an area without permission from the landholder can damage relations between the owner and the whole birding and conservation communities and can have legal implications. This applies explicitly also to traditionally owned lands and sacred sites as well as no-access areas in national parks and reserves. Remember that Indigenous traditional lands may be subject to additional regulations and respect the rights of traditional owners to care for their land.

Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads

Birders may drive on little used dirt roads. Churning up a dirt road especially in wet conditions, can create ill-will from landholders 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 under extreme fire danger.

Ethical Birding Tourism

Commercial tour operators and bird guides must follow all local and state and territory-based tourism regulations to protect guest safety, business and birdwatching reputation and bird and habitat welfare. This includes obtaining and maintaining all correct commercial vehicle licenses, insurances, accreditations and permits to operate in the areas you operate in.

Practice common courtesies 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 birders.

Group Birding Ethics

BirdLife Australia believes that both commercial and volunteer tour leaders should promote ethical birding and 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 BirdLife Australia ethical birding standards.

Participants in guided tours can drive ethical bird tourism by asking operators if they are accredited and have all necessary permits and insurances and if they apply and support Birdlife Australia's ethical birdwatching guidelines.

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 the right level for your group.

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

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 in birddata etc., 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.

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 someone's birding aspirations or a company's

commercial interests. Ideally, leaders should keep track of tour sightings, document unusual occurrences, and submit records to bird databases. Limit group sizes to reduce the impact on the environment and do not interfere with others using the same area

