

Guide to Ethical Bird Photography and Videography

Showing a sincere respect for birds and the places they need to thrive must come before getting that perfect photo or footage. Here's how to capture bird photos and videos responsibly.

*Please note that underlined words in this digital document link to additional online resources.

AVOID CAUSING UNNECESSARY DISTURBANCE OR STRESS TO THE BIRDS.

- Use a telephoto lens and maintain enough distance to allow your subject to behave naturally. Blinds offer a great way to watch and photograph or record video footage of birds without disturbing them.
- Never advance on birds with the intention of making them fly, whether they are lone birds or flocks of birds. This disrupts natural processes such as resting, foraging, or hunting, and causes them to expend energy unnecessarily.
- If your approach causes a bird to flush (fly or run away) or change its behavior, you're too close. Some birds may "freeze" in place rather than fly away, or may hunch into a protective, aggressive, or pre-flight stance. Watch for changes in posture indicating that a bird is stressed, and if you see these, back away. If focused on you, birds may miss a predator.
- Use flash sparingly (if at all), as a supplement to natural light. Avoid the use of flash on nocturnal birds (e.g., owls, nightjars) at night, as it may temporarily limit their ability to hunt for food or avoid obstacles.
- Learn the rules and laws that apply to the location. If minimum distances exist for proximity to wildlife, follow them.
- Before sharing locations of specific birds with other photographers, videographers, or birders, think carefully about potential impacts to the birds or their habitats, both individual and cumulative.
- Remove GPS data from your images/videos for rare or sensitive species like owls.
- Do not use drones to photograph or record video footage of birds, especially at their nests. Although drones can be useful for researchers and biologists documenting bird populations (such as at island nesting colonies), drones in general can be very disruptive to birds. They are also illegal in national parks and some state parks.
- Be cautious with remotely triggered cameras. Setting a trap around a fresh kill or cache is generally acceptable, but supplying bait or other lure in order to attract an animal is not. Never use direct flash, which may temporarily blind owls; a flash with a filter that lets only infrared light through is acceptable.
- Concern for birds' habitat is also essential. Be aware and respectful of your surroundings. Avoid trampling sensitive vegetation or disturbing other wildlife.

NESTING BIRDS ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE AND NEED EXTRA CONSIDERATION.

- Keep a respectful distance from the nest. If you're using a macro lens or including the nest as a focal point in an image/footage with a wide-angle lens, even if you're operating the camera remotely, you're probably too close. Telephoto lenses of at least 500mm are recommended.
- Avoid flushing adults, scaring young, or doing anything to draw the attention of predators to the nest. For example, repeatedly walking to a nest can leave both a foot trail and scent trail for predators.
- Do not move or cut anything from around the nest, such as branches or leaves, as these provide both essential camouflage and protection from the elements.
- Never use drones to photograph or record video footage of nests. They can cause injury and stress to the nestlings and parents.

BEACH-NESTING BIRDS (SHOREBIRDS AND SEABIRDS) REQUIRE SPECIAL CARE.

- Respect and give space to the boundaries of roped-off nesting areas.
- Maintain a minimum distance of 25 yards from beach-nesting birds, especially solitary flightless chicks but also adults brooding, feeding, or incubating chicks. Parents frightened from their nests leave young vulnerable to swift predation from gulls and other animals, as well as deadly temperature extremes.
- Situate yourself so that you are not in a direct line from the nest area to the water, which can inhibit the family and/or chicks from heading down to the waterline to feed. It is vital that chicks feed as much as possible to gain enough weight to survive their upcoming migration. If the young are feeding at the shoreline, take special care to keep your distance so they don't hurry back to the nest area/dunes.
- Accompany shorebird and seabird chick photos and videos with detailed captions that explain how you respected their space and needs. Leading by example is a critical component of ethical photography/videography.

LURING BIRDS CLOSER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY/VIDEOGRAPHY IS OFTEN POSSIBLE BUT SHOULD BE DONE IN A RESPONSIBLE WAY.

- First ask yourself: Could this be harmful to the bird? Always research the species and its behavior to better understand the answer.
- Bird feeding stations, whether or not they're used for photography/videography, should be kept clean, stocked only with appropriate food items, and positioned with the birds' safety in mind.
- Never lure birds (including but not limited to hawks, owls, eagles, ospreys, roadrunners) with bait. "Bait" includes live animals (such as snakes, fish, mice, crickets, worms); dead animals or parts of animals; processed meat; and decoys such as fake mice. Baiting can change the behavior of predatory birds in ways that are harmful for them.
- Playback of bird calls should be used sparingly, and not at all in the case of endangered birds, or birds at critical points in their nesting cycle. When a bird leaves his or her nest to pursue or defend their territory from a perceived challenger or predator, eggs and/or chicks are left open to predation and weather conditions.

SHOW RESPECT FOR PRIVATE AND PUBLIC PROPERTY, AND CONSIDERATION FOR OTHER PEOPLE.

- Enter private land only with permission. On public property such as parks and refuges, be aware of local regulations, hours, and closed areas.
- Be respectful of birds located on private land but viewable from a public vantage point, and also respect the privacy of these private landowners. If they are uncomfortable with your presence, leave.
- In group situations, be considerate of other photographers, videographers, and birders watching the same bird. Remember that your desire to photograph or record video footage of the bird doesn't outweigh the rights of others to observe it. Large groups of people are potentially more disturbing to birds, so it may be necessary to keep a greater distance.

WHEN CHOOSING TO PHOTOGRAPH/RECORD VIDEO AT A ZOO, SANCTUARY, OR REHABILITATION CENTER, MAKE SURE IT'S PROPERLY ACCREDITED AND CONFORMS TO BEST PRACTICES.

- Check with the [Association of Zoos and Aquariums \(AZA\)](#) to see if a zoo is accredited. For sanctuaries, the [Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries](#) is an accrediting organization that requires members to observe a strict code of ethics.
- In general, avoid photographing at non-accredited zoos (or zoos accredited by the ZAA, which is very different than the AZA), such as roadside zoos, or at wildlife centers or so-called sanctuaries where animals and birds are kept strictly for entertainment and profit.
- Never photograph or record video at photography game farms. They are not held to any standards, the animals are bred for a life in captivity solely for profit, and the resulting photos/videos portray an illusion of an animal in the wild. (Note that photos and videos created at game farms are explicitly prohibited from all leading photo/video contests, while those taken at zoos are often permitted.)

BE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT SHARING AND CAPTIONING YOUR BIRD PHOTOS/VIDEOS, WHETHER FOR PRINT, ONLINE, OR SOCIAL MEDIA.

- Always note in your caption if a bird is captive and explain its circumstances if you can. Integrity and honesty are crucial components of ethical photography/videography and will establish trust with your viewers.
- Was the bird baited for the purpose of scientific research and the photo/video taken under the strict supervision of researchers? If so, it's important to explain as much.
- For assistance in captioning, refer to the [Truth in Captioning](#) guidelines issued by the North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA).
- With each image and video you share, try to think not only about ethics, but also the appearance of ethics. When viewers scroll through a gallery of photos, the image may communicate much more strongly than the caption, and that could present a problem when there's something about the photo that requires explanation.

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