

Audubon's Guide to Ethical Bird Photography

Respect for birds and their habitats must come before getting that perfect shot. Here's how to be a responsible bird photographer.

The first essential element in bird photography is a sincere respect for the birds and their environment. In any conflict of interest, the well-being of the birds and their habitats must come before the ambitions of the photographer. Here are some basic guidelines.

Avoid causing unnecessary disturbance or stress to 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 birds without disturbance.
- 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 flying away, or may hunch into a protective, aggressive, or pre-flight stance. Watch for changes in posture indicating that the birds are stressed, and if you see these, back away.
- Learn the rules and laws of the location. If minimum distances exist for approaching wildlife, follow them.
- 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.
- Before sharing locations of specific birds with other photographers or birders, think carefully about potential impacts to the birds or their habitats, both individual and cumulative.
- Remove GPS data from your images for rare or sensitive species like owls.
- Concern for birds' habitat is also essential. Be aware and respectful of your surroundings. Avoid trampling sensitive vegetation or disturbing other wildlife.
- Do not use drones to photograph birds, especially at their nests. Although drones can be useful when working with researchers and biologists to document bird populations for science (such as 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 acceptable. Never use direct flash, which may temporarily blind owls; a flash with a filter that lets only infrared light through is acceptable.

Nesting birds are particularly vulnerable and need special 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 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 the adults, scaring the 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 nests, as 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. Parents frightened from their nests leave young vulnerable to swift predation from gulls and other animals.
- 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 nest area/dunes.
- Accompany shorebird and seabird chick photos with detailed captions that explain how you respected their space and needs. Leading by example is a critical component of ethical photography.

Luring birds closer for photography is often possible but should be done in a responsible way.

The guiding principle: Could it be harmful to the bird? Always research the species and its behavior.

- Bird feeding stations, whether or not they're used for photography, 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 these predatory birds in ways that are harmful for them.
- Playback of bird voices to lure them closer for photography 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 and birders watching the same bird. Remember that your desire to photograph the bird doesn't outweigh the rights of others to observe it. Remember also that large groups of people are

potentially more disturbing to birds, so it may be necessary to keep a greater distance.

When choosing to photograph at a zoo, sanctuary, or rehabilitation centers, 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 by them. 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 shooting at non-accredited zoos (or zoos accredited with ZAA, which is very different than the AZA), such as roadside zoos, or wildlife centers or so-called sanctuaries where animals and birds are kept strictly for entertainment and profit.
- [Never shoot at 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 portray an illusion of an animal in the wild. (Note that game farm photos are explicitly prohibited from all leading photo contests, although zoo photos are often permitted).

It's essential to be thoughtful about sharing and captioning your bird photos, in print, online, and for 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, and will establish trust in your viewers.
- Was the bird baited for the purpose of scientific research and the photo taken under the strict supervision of researchers? 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 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 explanations.

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