



Canberra Ornithologists Group

Policy name	COG Ethical Birding Guidelines	Version	1
Drafted by	COG Committee	Approved by	18 April 2024
Responsible person	COG President	Scheduled review date	5 years after approval date

Ethical Birding Guidelines

Purpose

These guidelines outline the ways in which those interested in birds can interact with birds ethically and in alignment with the objectives of the [Canberra Ornithologists Group](#) (COG, also known as Canberra Birds). The guidelines sit alongside the [COG Code of Conduct](#), which outlines expectations for how members interact with each other, with other birders and with the public. Together these two documents address how a responsible bird organisation expects its members to act.

It is to be expected that COG members, either singly or in groups, will watch, listen to, study, photograph and record native birds in their natural environment. Birding ethically involves minimising the impact of these activities on individual birds, bird populations and bird habitats. These guidelines primarily address bird welfare issues, but also address conservation issues when there could be impacts of bird watching or photography on rare or threatened species.

The COG Ethical Birding Guidelines are useful reference for field-trip leaders and during wider discussion. Experienced birders can also use these guidelines in conversation with new birders about how to behave around birds. They complement similar and more detailed guidelines disseminated by other birding organisations, some of which are referenced at the end of this document.

Bird research projects will be covered by the research ethics statements and approvals of the University or other organisation hosting the research, and bird banders should refer to the [Australian Bird and Bat Banding Schemes guidelines for banders](#).

Guidelines

- 1) Bird welfare is of paramount importance. Disturbance to birds should be minimised as far as reasonably possible.
 - In many cases, standing still or walking quietly and observing birds through binoculars or telescopes will not cause significant disturbance. However, if bird behaviour changes or birds become alert or alarmed, take flight, retreat into cover or cease feeding, the birder has approached too close.

- Avoid standing in an exposed situation where you are very obvious to the birds, avoid bright colours and strong perfumes, and do not deliberately flush roosting birds.
- The distance required between birders and birds will vary by species, situation and season.
- The presence of even well-behaved dogs can disturb birds, so in most situations it is better to bird without a dog.
- Large flocks of birds such as waders can congregate in one place that is rich in resources, and in those circumstances the impact of any disturbance can be magnified. Observe from a distance.

2) Take particular care not to disturb nesting birds. Nesting is a vulnerable part of the life-cycle, and disturbance can cause nest desertion and failed breeding. In addition, young birds are more likely to be sensitive to exposure or disturbance, particularly during inclement weather.

- Do not watch nesting birds for an extended period, or repeatedly visit a nesting location to check on progress, without precautions to avoid disturbance. Your presence may alert currawongs or other predators to the presence of a nest.
- Great care should be used to avoid disturbance of nesting individuals of rare or threatened species.
- Precise locations of nesting birds should not be disseminated, and even greater judgement is needed on whether to provide locations of nesting individuals of rare or threatened species.
- Some species, and raptors in particular, are especially sensitive to disturbance during nesting.

3) Particular aspects of bird photography can expose birds to disturbance, stress or danger.

- Do not take photographs progressively closer to a bird until it takes flight, retreats into cover or ceases feeding. Stay at a distance or in a less exposed location.
- Take care not to congregate in large groups to observe and photograph a particular bird.
- It is both illegal and unethical to interfere with a nest or its surrounding environment in an attempt to achieve better views or lighting.
- These guidelines apply particularly to rare and threatened species.
- A specific [Birdlife Photography Code of Ethics](#) has been prepared by the Birdlife Australia Bird Photography Group.

4) The impact of large groups or frequent visits to the same site can amplify disturbance.

- Field trip leaders should ensure that activities of the group do not cause cumulative stress on individual birds observed, and should encourage use of good birding practices.
- Ensure birding activities do not damage bird habitat, or create new tracks through previously undisturbed or bird-rich areas.

5) Use of call-back techniques or spotlighting is particularly contentious, and is not generally supported.

- These techniques have the capacity to cause significant disturbance, particularly if used repeatedly, at excessive volume (for call-back), or for extended periods at the same site.

- These techniques should especially be avoided during nesting season.

6) Ensure birding activities do not break local laws.

- Only enter private or leased land with the explicit permission of the land owner or lease-holder. Some ACT rural roads are simply rights-of-way through leased land, and some NSW Travelling Stock Reserves are subject to grazing permits that prohibit public access.
- Take care of the environment and bird habitats. Ensure you do not leave rubbish behind, and consider removing rubbish left by others.

Legal context

Under the [Nature Conservation Act 2014](#) (ACT), it is an offence to interfere with the nest of a native animal or something in the immediate environment of the nest, or to place the animal or its progeny in danger of not being able to breed. It is also an offence to engage in conduct that causes injury to an animal or places a native animal in danger of injury or death. Similarly, under the [Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016](#) (NSW) it is an offence to harm or attempt to harm any native or migratory bird.

Other information on ethical birding

The points in the above COG guidelines are presented in more detail in material prepared by other organisations. The following is a selection of relevant ethical birding guidelines from elsewhere.

Birdlife Australia

- [Ethical Birdwatching Guidelines](#) (January 2024)
- [Ethical Birding Factsheet for Birders](#) (Concise dot-points)
- [Ethical Birdwatching Guidelines Summary, and BirdLife Australia Ethical Birdwatching Guidelines for birders, BirdLife activities, research and tour operators](#) (August 2020: an extended version of the guidelines that includes advice for trip leaders)
- [BirdLife Photography Code of Ethics](#) (November 2021: specific advice from the Birdlife Australia Bird Photography Group).

American Bird Association [Code of Birding Ethics](#) (November 2019: an excellent 1-page summary).

National Audubon Society [Audubon's Guide to Ethical Bird Photography and Videography](#).

Australian Bird and Bat Banding Schemes & Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service [The Australian Bird Bander's Manual](#) (1989)

eBird [Sensitive Species in eBird](#)