

Ethical Standards in Birding: Protecting endangered, threatened, rare, and at-risk species

Revised, October 2025

SUMMARY: Birders have an obligation to protect certain species that overrides their personal interest in observing them.

“No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.” --Aldo Leopold

As birders, none of us would deliberately do anything to harm the birds we all enjoy and care about so deeply. But if we are not careful, our efforts to view birds may cause them harm. ***The effect of disturbance on foraging or resting birds is potentially much greater than formerly realized. Recent work has found multiple negative physiological effects of high levels of human disturbance.*** Therefore, as ethical birders, in order to protect Wisconsin’s at-risk birds, we must be self-regulating and be willing at times to sacrifice getting even closer to that “life” bird or capturing that perfect picture.

HOW CAN WE REDUCE THE POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF OUR EFFORTS TO SEE OR PHOTOGRAPH BIRDS?

- Be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible when viewing birds.
- In general, view birds from as far away as possible. A bird may be stressed by your presence, even though it does not respond behaviorally (e.g., fly away).
- Do not go off-trail, trespass, or enter restricted areas to view birds.
- Do not flush a hidden bird to get a look at it, force a perched bird to fly, or use bait to bring a bird in closer for identification or photographic purposes.
- Do not use recordings and similar methods, including “pishing”, to attract birds during their breeding season.
- Consider holding off reporting rare species when doing so could present a risk to the bird. (See further discussion below).
- Do not bring your dog (excluding service dogs) with you while birdwatching.

FAQS ABOUT BIRDING ETHICS RELATED TO ENDANGERED, THREATENED RARE, AND AT-RISK SPECIES:

“What’s wrong with playing a recording to attract one of these birds? I’ll be careful and not play it too much.”

How much is too much? Other people may have come along that day and also played a recording, thinking they were the only ones to do so. A bird on territory perceives this recorded voice as a competitor, and they may become stressed and expend time and energy investigating and challenging this “intruder”. This is time and energy that could have gone into recovering from migration, attracting a mate, nest building, or feeding a mate and/or young.

(The use of recordings by qualified researchers is a possible exception, but careful regulation of this activity must be part of an officially-accepted research plan.)

“If I don’t report the rare, nesting bird I found on social media, hotline, or listserv, other birders won’t be able to see and enjoy it. Isn’t this being selfish?”

- Think first of the bird, its well-being, and the potential it has for successfully nesting. The pressures from additional visitors, even well-meaning ones, could ruin a bird’s chances for nesting successfully or even surviving. So please **use caution** when sharing information about the locations of summering or wintering rare, threatened, endangered, or “sensitive” (easily disturbed) species, and when you do so, remind others to follow ethical birding guidelines (ABA, WSO -- see below). Please only share specific locations when these birds are viewable under circumstances (e.g., from roads or public hiking trails) that increased birder activity will not disturb the birds. You cannot control what happens after you reveal a bird’s location, and you may subject the bird to disturbance by others that could jeopardize their nesting success or even their survival.

A special note about reporting to eBird

eBird offers special guidance on this subject, including species-specific guidelines, at

<https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48000803210-sensitive-species-in-ebird>

eBird hides the exact location of birds reported that meet its “Sensitive Species” criteria either globally or regionally. These are birds that are at risk of human exploitation or disturbance, and are often, though not always, listed as endangered or threatened. However, this does not include species that are not considered particularly vulnerable to exploitation or disturbance but are merely rare or vagrants. To help protect these birds from disturbance, eBird recommends:

“There are other cases where it may be best to not report specific observations publicly on eBird, even if the species isn't sensitive as a whole, either due to restricted site access concerns or because the bird may be harmed in some way. eBirders must take it upon themselves to understand the situation locally and to use their best judgment, as the status of a species may change from place to place.

“Here are a few ways to help protect sensitive birds when reporting to eBird:

- Wait until the season is over and the sensitive bird(s) have left before reporting the birds to eBird. You can go back and ‘edit’ your checklists later to include sensitive records after the birds have departed.
- Do not provide explicit coordinates or directions to sensitive records. For instance, you may say that birds were seen at a state park, instead of listing the exact location therein.
- Delay reporting observations for 8 days or more to keep these reports off eBird Alerts.
- Hide observations in eBird after you have submitted a checklist by selecting that option from the “Checklist Tools” dropdown menu. This keeps the species off the output (e.g., maps, bar charts etc.) but does not hide the fact that you went birding altogether (i.e., the date and location may show up on the Recent Checklists feed, but no one will be able to see the species you saw). Once the species is safe again, we always recommend 'unhiding' your checklist because all sightings on hidden eBird checklists cannot be used for scientific analysis or by fellow birders.”

“What’s wrong with slipping quietly into a posted area to view a bird? I’m more careful than the average birder and wouldn’t disturb anything.”

In the case of very sensitive species, such as the Piping Plover, even a single intrusion may be enough to cause them to abandon an area. Besides, we don’t know what other pressures they may be facing, such as predators, the effects of weather, food availability, and so on. Your intrusion may be the “straw that broke the camel’s back” and causes nest failure. And what if everyone felt the same way you do about bypassing protections to view a bird? The protective measures would become meaningless and ineffective.

“Ordinarily I wouldn’t pursue a bird off a trail or approach closely, but isn’t it important to “push the envelope” in order to document the bird?”

No. Take notes of your observations, get what pictures you can from a distance, but don’t disturb the bird or trespass to further document it.

“I saw someone ignore signs and bypass a fence to enter a closed nesting area. How should I handle this?”

Write down a description of this person and their vehicle, including the license plate number, and immediately report the incident to WDNR law enforcement or wildlife management personnel, or to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). It is best if you do not approach or confront the person yourself.

Wisconsin DNR Violation Hotline

DNR staff are available to receive your report from 7a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. If the violation requires an immediate response, please call 1-800-TIP-WDNR (1-800-847-9367) to speak with a law enforcement dispatcher.

Link to WDNR office locations: <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/contact/OfficeLocations.html>

Link to the list of Wisconsin's Endangered and Threatened species

<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/EndangeredResources/ETList>

The federal Endangered Species Act protects all species that are federally listed as endangered or threatened. It is illegal to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect any listed animal. **The Migratory Bird Treaty Act** makes it illegal for anyone to take, possess, import, export, transport, sell, purchase, or barter any migratory bird, or the parts, nests or eggs of such a bird except under the terms of a valid permit issued pursuant to Federal regulations.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 3 Law Enforcement

Special Agent in Charge-Bloomington, Minn.

[\(612\) 713-5320](tel:6127135320)

The following are species in Wisconsin that are particularly vulnerable to disturbance. This list is not all-inclusive. Please **do not** knowingly approach nesting sites or play recordings of these species' songs or calls during the nesting season.

- **Yellow-throated Warbler**
- **Worm-eating Warbler**
- **American Goshawk**
- **Piping Plover**
- **Barn Owl**
- **Red-shouldered Hawk** nest sites.
- **Osprey** and **Bald Eagle** nest sites.
- **Kirtland's Warbler** summering or nesting anywhere in Wisconsin.

- **Whooping Crane** Report rare bird nesting observations to the Wisconsin Natural Heritage Inventory:
<https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/f57cba58511a4c99b1d1292776b05125>
- *Also vulnerable, during non-breeding season:*
- **Long-eared Owl** on winter roosts anywhere in Wisconsin: Please do not closely approach these roosting birds, as doing so may cause them to abandon the roost site, which may adversely affect their winter survival. Please do not report roosting locations on online birding networks.
- **Gyr Falcon**

RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The effect of disturbance on foraging or resting birds is potentially much greater than formerly realized. Recent work has found multiple negative physiological effects of high levels of human disturbance (Pirota et al. 2018, Poole et al. 2022). Evidence for the harmful effects of disturbance exist for a wide range of diurnal and nocturnal raptors, shorebirds, swifts, and multiple passerines.
- "...territory establishment is a sensitive period for birds, when even low levels of human recreation may be perceived as threatening, and alter settlement decisions. This can have important implications for the conservation of species, which might go unnoticed when focusing only on already established birds." (Bötsch, et al. 2018)
- Disturbance can also be caused by off-leash dogs (Thomas et al. 2024).
- Many anthropogenic stressors are known to affect animals; including artificial light (Rich and Longcore 2005), noise pollution (Shannon et al. 2016), chemical pollution (Richard et al. 2021), habitat fragmentation (Pimm and Raven 2000), and climate change (Thomas et al. 2004). The presence of snowmobiles, roads, or hikers (Bötsch, et al. 2018, Jukka et al. 2010) can have adverse effects on birds whether they are breeding or on winter territories.
 - Stress can be cumulative and have profound negative effects ([Stress in Animals: Key Mechanisms and Health Impact - BiologyInsights](#))
- The presence of anthropogenic noise can have deleterious effects on breeding songbirds, as they need relative quiet to communicate to mates and young (Proppe et al. 2012).

FURTHER RESEARCH

One of the most valuable papers we've found during the literature search for this revision (Beale, C. M. 2007) includes **this abstract**:

"Measuring the impacts of anthropogenic activities on wildlife is crucial for ensuring effective

management. Animal behavior is often considered a sensitive index of impact, but its use requires detailed understanding of the context-dependent decisions animals make. In this manuscript I identify a number of areas where insights from the field of animal behavior are relevant to studies of human disturbance and activity. In particular, I differentiate between disturbance effects and disturbance impacts and show how context-dependent decision-making often makes animal behavior an unreliable index of impact. I show the areas where animal behavior can be useful in quantifying minimum disturbance impact when additional information is available and identify a number of areas where further research may help improve the management of anthropogenic activities within wildlife areas."

LINKS TO ONLINE RESOURCES

American Birding Association Code of Ethics: <http://www.aba.org/about/ethics.html>

Nature Photographers' Ethics: <https://www.andreaudetphotography.com/post/principles-and-ethics-in-nature-photography>

Wisconsin Society for Ornithology Code of Ethics: <http://wsobirds.org/about-wso/codeof-ethics>

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June 2015