



## EPISODE 4

# Birding Ethics

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**INTRO:** Hey there, I'm Christa, your host for the Birding Tools podcast.

Each week, I'll delve into the wonderful world of birds for birding beginners and those wanting to get the low-down on what goes into birdwatching and identifying birds.

Let's get started.

**CHRISTA ROLLS:** First, I wanted to let you know I've just created a new Birding Tools Facebook Community Group, so if you'd like to engage with other birders, post your bird photos or questions, and more I'd love to see you over there! I'll be adding the link to our podcast show notes, or you can search on Facebook for the Birding Tools Community.

This week on the Birding Tools Podcast I'll be delving into the ins and outs of birding ethics, including how to reduce impacts on birds, the habitats on which they depend, and our fellow birders. Whether you're just starting on your birdwatching endeavors or you've been birding for years, this is a really important topic we should all continue striving toward.

Some of the points I'm going to mention might seem somewhat obvious, but for those who have been in the field and experienced each and every thing I'm going to get into, you see that actually going into each point is important.

Now, you might think, there's no way I've ever done anything to put birds, their habitat, or my fellow birders in a bad position! But if you've never even thought about it, you might just be the one causing the trouble. Keep on listening to find out – I'm telling you, a little introspection goes a long way!

We go out and watch birds because of the joy and fulfillment it gives us. In turn, to continue being able to see the birds we so love, we have to protect them and the habitats in which they're found.

According to the American Birding Association Code of Ethics, there are three facets to birding ethics. Those include “respect and promote birds and their environment, respect and promote the birding community and its individual members, and respect and promote the law and the rights of others.”

Let's dive into each of these points in more detail, starting with how to respect birds while you're out birding.

First, give birds their space.

Birds have what's called a flush distance, meaning they'll fly away to get away from danger. This distance changes depending on the species, so for example, larger birds take longer to take off in flight and are often the ones that flush, or fly away, sooner than smaller birds.

My tip is to watch from a distance only close enough where the animal acts as if you aren't there. As soon as the bird starts to change its behavior by making alarm calls, or flying away, you'll know you've gotten too close. In this same vein, being cognizant during breeding season of where birds have their nests or are caring for their young is part of this.

I have SO many stories of times I've been out birding and someone has scared off a bird I was trying to watch or photograph. I bet you can think of a time you've witnessed this, too.

One memory that especially sticks out in my mind is when I went to a popular spot see eagles in Washington State -- Seabeck. This is also where Bonnie Block got her 2016 Audubon award-winning shot of a Bald Eagle, so it really

popularized the location as a destination for bird photographers. While everyone lined up on the shore to watch eagles and other raptors and wading birds swoop down or wade around to grab fish, one person kept moving their tripod further and further out into the mud flat. This also meant the birds landed further and further out, until you really couldn't see them that well. If there's an example of what not to do as far as giving birds their space, this is it!

Next, sparingly use audio or visual cues to attract birds.

Bird audio playback, found on nearly every smartphone birding app these days, is a helpful identification tool. If you aren't 100% certain about the bird you're seeing, but they're making noise, you can play the sounds of the birds you think you're seeing to compare.

But, this is especially where we need to be conscientious about what you're attracting and for how long you attract the bird.

Under no circumstances should you use cues to attract sensitive, threatened, or endangered species. Leave this work up to the researchers working to conserve those species and their populations.

A good rule is if you're playing audio to compare sounds, as soon as you see or hear any birds reacting to your audio, to stop playback immediately.

See, the bird is attracted to the sound of the song you're playing because they are presumably defending their territory. That's time and energy that individual is spending on you instead of defending against actual competitors or predators.

Alternatively, depending on the song you're playing, you could be playing a song that is a competitor for other species in the vicinity, so for two species that compete for the same resources, or even trigger a warning in other birds that a predator is nearby.

Overall, use audio cues sparingly.

If you're feeding birds, make sure to keep feeders well-maintained and clean.

This means replacing seed often and removing any seed that looks like it's starting to grow mold. This is particularly important in areas that get a lot more rain, or have higher humidity, than others. Down here in Sacramento, we don't have the issue of our bird food in our yard getting soggy at all, but when we lived up near Seattle, we definitely had to watch to make sure water leaks weren't getting into the food.

In this same vein, if you have a water dish, replace the water often to prevent algae and any larval growth.

For both the feeder and the water dish, be sure they're situated to avoid predators, such as domestic cats. Try to move these away from bushes or other locations where predators can hide in wait for a bird to land. Even better, for your feeder, see if you can place the feeder at a higher vantage point away from the ground.

These points not only take care of birds, but also create good bird environments.

This leads into my next point, don't bait wild birds.

No, this isn't the same as using a feeder. I'm talking about bringing bread to the beach so you can lure in all manner of gulls for a better look.

This is an important point to remember. Even if you feed the birds at your house, be sure to only feed them wild bird food, so no human food or leftovers, and continue maintaining your distance from them to discourage a human association with that food. These are still wild animals and although you might be OK with the birds being in your yard, you don't want a person who isn't a fan of birds (yes, they exist out there) to be the one to run into that bird who has associated people with food.

And finally, the next point to consider is avoiding posting locations of sensitive animals.

We are so connected to social media and wildlife reporting apps that it's almost second nature to post where you are and what you're seeing. When

people find out where rare wildlife or cool birds are located, they flock to that location (pun intended).

You should be especially conscientious of this when viewing sensitive or endangered species. This applies to nests or breeding sites of any kind, and if you spot something cool but sensitive, it's probably better that you keep that location to yourself. Even better, if you're at a wildlife refuge or managed birding site, consider reaching out to the rangers or biologists there to let them know about the location of where a particular bird is nesting, not only for their situational awareness but also so they can work to prevent any disturbances to that site.

Next, let's chat about how creating and encouraging good bird habitat and environments helps birds.

I mentioned above that creating healthy, happy spaces with fresh food and water, away from predators is a great way to enhance your local bird environment. You can even go a step further and plant bird-friendly plants that produce seeds or nectar that birds in your area particularly enjoy.

But, away from the home, avoid treading into sensitive habitat, nesting habitat, or off-trail locations. This same rule applies to where your bird blind or equipment (such as your scope) is placed.

Not only is this for your safety, it's for the safety of the creatures that live there and the habitats on which they depend.

One of the first memories I recall when I think about this point in particular is when my husband and I were visiting Skomer Island off the Pembrokeshire Coast in Wales. Upon entry to the island, visitors go through a little briefing to learn about the ecology of the island and the various animals you'll spot during your visit. If you EVER get the opportunity to visit, as a birder, I guarantee you'll absolutely love it. It's one of the THE best places to spot Atlantic Puffins during their breeding season in spring and summer, and it hosts half of the world's population of breeding Manx Shearwaters. Just a little tip, you can only see the



Manx Shearwaters come out after dusk, so you'll have to get one of the few available spots to spend a night in their overnight bunkhouse on the island.

Of course, one of the critical points that island biologists briefed to visitors was ensuring people stay on the designated pathways, and that any equipment stays on the path, too. Thousands of birds have burrows around the island, in which their young are snuggled up tight waiting for their parents to return with food. A misplaced step or tripod leg could mean a collapsed burrow.

Unfortunately, we still witnessed people throwing their backpacks off the trail, and more, and that's totally not cool. Just be more cognizant of the environment around you and reduce your footprint as much as possible.

Finally, part of the process of caring for birds is also respecting your fellow birders and the rights of others.

First, follow any laws, rules, or regulations regarding site or land access. Respect people's private property, and any other regulations pertaining to a piece of land. This may include access times (so, for example, lots of places close at sundown), payment or permit requirements, use allowances (so, for example, some refuges don't allow running or bike riding), group size allowances, and more.

Next, minimize the amount of noise you make while you're in nature. This helps avoid disturbing wildlife and others who may be watching wildlife.

So, when I'm out and about birding, I'll put my phone on vibrate so that if I get a call, it won't happen right when me or anyone else is trying to get a good look at a skittish bird.

Remember, too, that if you're watching birds, keep your voice at a low-tone inside voice. You don't necessarily want to whisper, as this can sort of mimic the sound of pishing, or warning call sounds that certain bird species will make, and you also don't want to be shouting across the landscape.

Importantly, respect other birders. Be courteous and helpful to new birders in particular, to encourage and help them along in their birding journey. I always

say “hi” to everyone while I’m out birding and maybe even ask if they’ve seen anything they found exciting while they were birding. More often than not, people are happy to share what they’ve seen or experienced that day. I’ve definitely traveled to some places where people don’t randomly say hi to other people – that’s not really my style, I love getting to connect with other people.

Alternatively, some people use birding to get away from the stresses in their day, so if you notice someone not being particularly chatty, respect their time and space, too.

This might sound like a lot of things to think about, but in reality, when it all plays out in the field, it’s really simple and easy to implement. It’s just a matter of being more cognizant of these different things.

One point I haven’t yet brought up that makes a world of difference to birds and contributes to their longer term conservation is advocating for conservation policies or initiatives that directly benefit birds. This might be something as easy as switching your daily coffee routine to bird-friendly coffee, or encouraging your local stores to install bird-friendly window decals to prevent bird-window strikes. This might be on a larger level, like advocating for green spaces, or city-wide lights-out periods during migration. Or even further, working with organizations that preserve and protect critical bird habitats, like grasslands, wetlands, and more. Overall, even a little bit of action, and sharing that knowledge with your birder friends, can go such a long way for birds.

And there you have it! Some critical points important in understanding more about birding ethics and how to treat birds and your fellow birders better. To see the full American Birding Association code of ethics, visit their website at [aba.org](http://aba.org) and search for “code of birding ethics” and I’ll be adding the link to our show notes.

Thanks so much for tuning in to the Birding Tools Podcast and I hope this material was helpful to you.

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To access information about the products and freebie I mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at [birdingtools.com](http://birdingtools.com).

Next week, I'll be talking about the Global Birding Weekend happening the weekend of 17 and 18 October, including what it is and how you can get involved, so make sure you save those dates and set them aside for a weekend full of birding AND virtually connecting with other birders around the world. Donated funds will go to BirdLife International's project to stop the illegal trade in birds, so don't miss out!

If you enjoyed this episode and want to get updates on the latest Birding Tools has to offer, subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening now.

See you next time.