

first do no harm

Ethics and bird photography



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I believe that a discussion of ethics in bird photography has never been more relevant than it is today, and perhaps most of all because many more people than ever before are now getting involved in bird and nature photography. The more photographers there are in natural environments, the greater the potential for impact on their wild subjects.

For me, there are two distinct aspects to ethics in bird photography. The first – and to me by far the more important – is the welfare of the wild subject. Photographers can get too close to a bird, perhaps because they don't have a powerful enough lens. Sometimes it happens accidentally, due to their poor field skills, or it can be intentional, when they want to make the bird fly up.

It's true, though, that if a photographer gets too close, the bird can usually fly away. If a bird I am photographing flies off, I don't approach it again. However, more damage can be done if the subject is on a nest, as it will become distressed if a photographer approaches too closely. Birds are often more on edge when they are breeding than at other times of the year and they are normally very cautious in the vicinity of their eggs or chicks. Disturbing them by getting too close or making loud noises can easily result in them flying away instead of caring for their young. Some shy species might even abandon the nest altogether.

Sometimes photographers use playback recordings of calls to attract wild birds into range or into the open. Whether or not this is harmful to birds may depend on

how many times an individual is subjected to the practice.

And then there are photographers who attract birds within range of their cameras by providing them with food or drink. For some shy species, this may be the only way to get a decent shot of them – or sometimes even just see them. Opinions differ on whether or not this is ethical. For myself, I usually first consider whether the birds are living in a properly protected area where their natural food is quite easy to be found or whether they are on unprotected land where the habitat is degraded. If the former, attracting them to an 'unnatural' food source could be detrimental. On the other hand, birds living in degraded or human-altered habitats, like farms or towns, may depend on food and water provided by people. Many bird-lovers put food out for their garden birds and few would argue that this is unethical. Having weighed up these points, I then ask myself whether providing food is likely to harm the birds' chances of survival while it is happening or after it has stopped. If not, then I'm comfortable with doing it.

The question of tossing fish 'bait' overboard on offshore birding trips to attract seabirds close enough to photograph them is, for me, more clear-cut. The open ocean is so vast that it would be much more difficult, if not impossible, to get close photos of some species if this were not done.

The second aspect for me is how far will an individual photographer go to get his or her 'best shot'? In South Africa there is no written set of best-practice guidelines for bird photography, which means that we have to regulate our own behaviour – and be open and honest about how far we go. One easy way to reduce the complexity of ethical bird photography is for the photographer to disclose how and where a shot was taken. I am entirely happy

to reveal the full details of how I made every image that I have published, whether in print or online. My online posts always have a location in their description, from which the viewer can tell whether the subject was wild or captive and thus get a better understanding of the image. Not disclosing how a particular photo was taken – was the subject captive or wild, was bait used or not? – can make it very difficult for a viewer to appreciate fully the image and how it was created.

In this regard, photo competitions can be something of a two-edged sword. Those that reward a 'different' image without taking into account how it was obtained can encourage the pursuit of such images whether or not it is detrimental to birds' welfare. Some photographers may also be tempted to manipulate their digital images to misrepresent what they actually saw or what happened. They are, however, almost certain to be found out sooner or later.

The good news for birds in national parks and game reserves is that they are usually protected in one way or another. Typically, protected areas have rules and regulations that limit where human visitors can go and that prohibit the direct disturbance of wildlife. Birds that live outside these areas don't have it so good, though, and are often vulnerable to being harassed by photographers.

Yet even in protected areas, there are photographers who don't abide by the regulations. As a nature and photographic guide, I spend a lot of time in national parks and game reserves and have learnt from experience that while most guides and photographers show respect for wild birds, this is not true for everyone. I have seen photographers walk right into the middle of a nesting colony of bee-eaters, frightening the entire colony into the air. I have witnessed owls and nightjars



being subjected to blinding flash exposures, again and again. Sometimes I meet local guides who are unwilling to work with some professional photographers because of their single-mindedness in pursuing certain images.

On a positive note, in terms of equipment the high standard of today's digital SLR cameras and telephoto lenses means that photographers are better equipped than ever before to get good images without having to get closer than is comfortable to their subjects. On the downside, bird-call playback devices have become more widespread, as has the use of remote-camera devices like drones, which can be very disturbing to birds. Some photographers may be tempted to deploy a drone to make birds take flight, though this is forbidden in most national parks and in many private reserves and concessions. The same goes for the use of remote wheeled vehicles on which a camera is mounted.

As a bird photographer, I wish to disturb my subjects as little as possible, but I admit that there are occasions when it happens – usually when I am trying for a print-quality image or when my subject is quite small. I am always mindful, though, of keeping any disturbance to a minimum, and avoiding it if I possibly can.

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above *The growing number of hides in natural areas now makes it possible to get close to birds without disturbing them. The best hides offer good photographic angles and close viewing distances.*

opposite *This Trum-peter Hornbill chose to nest in a forest tree within the grounds of a lodge alongside the Chobe River. By sitting quietly on the veranda of an upper-storey room, I was able to photograph the bird going to and from its nest site.*

