

The birdwatchers' code

Around three million adults go birdwatching every year in the UK¹. Following *The birdwatchers' code* is good practice, common sense and will help everybody to enjoy seeing birds.

1 The interests of the birds come first

Birds respond to people in many ways, depending on the species, location and time of year.

2 Be an ambassador for birdwatching

Think about your fieldcraft and behaviour, not just so that you can enjoy your birdwatching, but so others can too.



Capercaillie

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

If birds are disturbed they may keep away from their nests, leaving chicks hungry or enabling predators to take their eggs or young. During cold weather, or when migrants have just made a long flight, repeatedly disturbing birds can mean they use up vital energy that they need for feeding.

Intentionally or recklessly disturbing some birds at or near their nest is illegal in Britain.

Whether you are particularly interested in photography, bird ringing, sound-recording or birdwatching, remember to always put the interests of the birds first.

- Avoid going too close to birds or disturbing their habitats – if a bird flies away or makes repeated alarm calls, you're too close. If it leaves, you won't get a good view of it anyway.
- Stay on roads and paths where they exist and avoid disturbing habitat used by birds.
- Think about your fieldcraft. You might disturb a bird even if you are not very close, eg a flock of wading birds on the foreshore can be disturbed from a mile away if you stand on the seawall.
- Repeatedly playing a recording of bird song or calls to encourage a bird to respond can divert a territorial bird from other important duties, such as feeding its young. Never use playback to attract a species during its breeding season.

(See 'The law', overleaf, in relation to Schedule 1 species in the UK.)



Black grouse

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)



Little tern

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)



Barn owl

John Markham (rspb-images.com)

Respond positively to questions from interested passers-by. They may not be birdwatchers yet, but a good view of a bird or a helpful answer may ignite a spark of interest. Your enthusiasm could start a lifetime's interest in birds and a greater appreciation of wildlife and its conservation.

Consider using local services, such as pubs, restaurants, petrol stations, and public transport. Raising awareness of the benefits to local communities of trade from visiting birdwatchers may, ultimately, help the birds themselves.

¹2.85 million adults aged over 15 in Britain [but says UK in intro sentence] go birdwatching regularly or occasionally. (Target Group Index, BMRB International 2004)

This code puts the interests of birds first, and respects other people, whether or not they are interested in birds. It applies whenever you are watching birds in the UK or abroad. Please help everybody to enjoy birdwatching by following the code, leading by example and sensitively challenging the minority of birdwatchers who behave inappropriately.

Five things to remember:

- avoid disturbing birds and their habitats – the birds' interests should always come first
- be an ambassador for birdwatching
- know the law and the rules for visiting the countryside, and follow them
- send your sightings to the County Bird Recorder and record them on www.birdtrack.net
- Think about the interests of wildlife and local people before passing on news of a rare bird, especially during the breeding season.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The birdwatchers' code has been produced by a partnership of

The Association of County Recorders and Editors

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www.bou.org.uk

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www.surfbirds.com

For more information, please contact us at:

The RSPB, UK Headquarters,
The Lodge, Sandy Bedfordshire SG19 2DL.
Tel: 01767 680551

RSPB Northern Ireland Headquarters,
Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 7QT.
Tel: 028 9049 1547

RSPB Scotland Headquarters,
Dunedin House, 25 Ravelston Terrace,
Edinburgh EH4 3TP.
Tel: 0131 311 6500

RSPB Wales Headquarters,
Sutherland House, Castlebridge,
Cowbridge Road East, Cardiff CF11 9AB.
Tel: 029 2035 3000

www.rspb.org.uk



The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all.

Front cover: Little tern by Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

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for birds
for people
for ever

THE BIRDWATCHERS' CODE



3 Know the Countryside Code, and follow it

Respect the wishes of local residents and landowners and don't enter private land without permission, unless it is open for public access on foot.

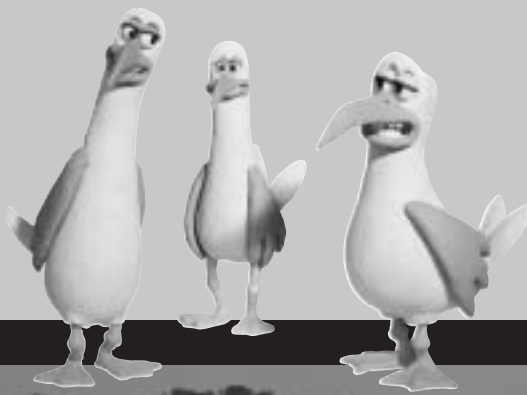


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Wader flock

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)



Lapwing

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Follow the codes on access and the countryside for the place you're walking in.

Irresponsible behaviour may cause a land manager to deny access to others (eg for important bird survey work). It may also disturb the bird or give birdwatching bad coverage in the media.

Access to the countryside

Legislation provides access for walkers to open country in Britain, and includes measures to protect wildlife. Note that the rules and codes are different in each part of Britain, so plan ahead and make sure you know what you can do.



In England and Wales, this symbol denotes land open for public access on foot. Access is to land mapped as mountain, moor, heath and down, and to registered common land. However, local restrictions may be in force, so follow the Countryside Code and plan your visit.

In England, the Countryside Code and maps showing areas for public access are online at:

www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk

In Wales, access maps are at:

www.ccw.gov.uk/tirgofal

and the Countryside Code at:

www.codcefngwlad.org.uk.

In **Scotland**, access is available to open country and to field margins of enclosed land to reach open country, provided you act in accordance with the Scottish Access Code – see:

www.outdooraccess-scotland.com

Although there is no statutory right of access in **Northern Ireland**, there is lots of information, including the Country Code, at:

www.countrysiderecreation.com

4 Law

Laws protecting birds and their habitats are the result of hard campaigning by generations of birdwatchers. We must make sure that we don't allow them to fall into disrepute.

In **England, Scotland and Wales**, it is a criminal offence to disturb, intentionally or recklessly, at or near the nest, a species listed on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (see www.rspb.org.uk/policy/wildbirdslaw for a full list). Disturbance could include playback of songs and calls. The courts can impose fines of up to £5,000 and/or a prison sentence of up to six months for each offence.

In **Scotland**, disturbing capercaillie and ruffs at leks is also an offence. It is a criminal offence to intentionally disturb a bird at or near the nest under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

The Government can, for particular reasons such as scientific study, issue licences to individuals that permit limited disturbance, including monitoring of nests and ringing.

It is a criminal offence to destroy or damage, intentionally or recklessly, a special interest feature of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or to disturb the wildlife for which the site was notified. In **England, Wales and Northern Ireland**, a fine of up to £20,000 may be imposed by a Magistrates' Court, or an unlimited fine by a Crown Court. In **Scotland**, the maximum fine on summary conviction is £40,000, or an unlimited fine on conviction or indictment.

If you witness anyone who you suspect may be illegally disturbing or destroying wildlife or habitat, phone the police immediately (ideally, with a six-figure map reference) and report it to the RSPB.

5 Rare birds

Mobile phones, telephone and pager services and the internet mean you can now share your sightings instantly.

If you discover a rare bird, please bear the following in mind.



?(rspb-images.com)



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Mark Richards (rspb-images.com)

Nightjar

- Consider the potential impact of spreading the news and make an effort to inform the landowner (or, on a nature reserve, the warden) first. Think about whether the site can cope with a large number of visitors and whether sensitive species might be at risk, such as breeding terns, flocks of wading birds or rare plants. The county bird recorder or another experienced birdwatcher can often give good advice.
- On private land, always talk to the landowner first. With a little planning, access can often be arranged.
- People coming to see a rare bird can raise money for a local reserve, other wildlife project or charity. Consider organising a voluntary collection at access points to the site.
- Rare breeding birds are at risk from egg-collectors and some birds of prey from persecution. If you discover a rare breeding species that you think is vulnerable, contact the RSPB; it has considerable experience in protecting rare breeding birds. Please also report your sighting to the county bird recorder or the Rare Breeding Birds Panel.

(www.rbbp.org.uk). Also, consider telling the landowner – in most cases, this will ensure that the nest is not disturbed accidentally.

If you have the opportunity to see a rare bird, enjoy it, but don't let your enthusiasm override common sense. In addition to the guidelines above:

- park sensibly, follow instructions and consider making a donation if requested
- don't get too close so that you can take a photograph – you'll incur the wrath of everyone else watching if you scare the bird away
- be patient if the viewing is limited, talk quietly and give others a chance to see the bird too
- do not enter private areas without permission
- not everyone likes to see an 'organised flush' and it should never be done in important wildlife habitats or where there are other nesting or roosting birds nearby. A flush should not be organised more frequently than every two hours and not within two hours of sunrise or sunset, so the bird has chance to feed and rest.

6 Make your sightings count

Add to tomorrow's knowledge of birds by sending your sightings to www.birdtrack.net

This online recording scheme from the BTO, the RSPB and BirdWatch Ireland allows you to input and store all of your birdwatching records, which in turn helps to support species and site conservation. With one click, you can also have your records forwarded automatically to the relevant county recorder.

County recorders and local bird clubs are the mainstay of bird recording in the UK. Your records are important for local conservation and help to build the county's ornithological history. For a list of county bird recorders, ask at your local library, or visit www.britishbirds.co.uk/countyrecorders

You can also get involved in a UK-wide bird monitoring scheme, such as the Breeding Bird Survey and the Wetland Bird Survey (see www.bto.org for details).

If you've been birdwatching abroad, you can give your sightings to the BirdLife International Partner in that country by visiting www.worldbirds.org Your data could be vital in helping to protect sites and species in the country you've visited.