

This code should be familiar to all birdwatchers. It has been drafted after consultation between the BOU, RSPB, BTO, SOC, WWT and editors of BB.

1. The welfare of the birds must come first.
2. Habitat must be protected.
3. Keep disturbance to birds and their habitat to a minimum.
4. When you find a rare bird think carefully about whom you should tell.
5. Do not harass rare migrants.
6. Abide by the bird protection laws at all times.
7. Respect the rights of landowners.
8. Respect the rights of other people in the countryside.
9. Make your records available to the local bird recorder.
10. Behave abroad as you would when birdwatching at home.

## The Birdwatchers' Code

Almost three million adults go birdwatching every year in the UK. Following The Birdwatchers' Code is good practice, common sense and should enable us all to enjoy seeing birds. It puts the interests of birds first and respects other people, whether or not they are interested in birds. It applies not just when you are at a nature reserve, but whenever you are watching birds in the UK or abroad. It will be most effective if we lead by example and sensitively challenge 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 [www.birdtrack.net](http://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.

### The interests of the bird come first

Birds respond to people in many ways, depending on the species, location and time of year. Disturbance can keep birds from their nests, leaving chicks hungry or enabling predators to take eggs or young. During cold weather or when migrants have just made a long flight, repeatedly flushing birds can mean they use up vital energy that they need for feeding. Intentional or reckless disturbance of some species at or near the nest is illegal in Britain.

***Whether your particular interest is photography, ringing, sound-recording or birdwatching, remember that the interests of the bird must always come 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. And if it leaves, you won't get a good view.*
- *Stay on roads and paths where they exist and avoid disturbing habitat used by birds.*

- *Think about your fieldcraft. Disturbance is not just about going too close - 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 birdsong 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', below, in relation to Schedule 1 species in the UK.)*

## **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.

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 light 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 and petrol stations, and public transport. Raising awareness of the benefits to local communities of trade from visiting birdwatchers may, ultimately, help the birds themselves.

## **Know the rules for visiting the countryside, and follow them**

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. Follow the codes on access and the countryside for the place you're walking in (see 'Access to the countryside', below). Irresponsible behaviour may cause a land manager to deny access to others (eg for necessary 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**, 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](http://www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk). In Wales, access maps are at [www.ccw.gov.uk/tirgofal](http://www.ccw.gov.uk/tirgofal) and the Countryside Code at [www.codcefngwlad.org.uk](http://www.codcefngwlad.org.uk).

## **Make your sightings count**

Add to tomorrow's knowledge of birds by sending your sightings to [www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net). This online recording scheme from the BTO, RSPB and BirdWatch Ireland enables you to store all your birdwatching records and support species and site conservation.

With one click, you can have your records forwarded automatically to the relevant county recorder. Send your sightings to county recorders and local bird clubs, a mainstay of bird recording in the UK. Your records are important for local conservation and to build the county's ornithological history. For a list of the County Bird Recorders, visit [www.britishbirds.co.uk/countyrecorders](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/countyrecorders) or ask at your local library.

Get involved in national monitoring schemes too, such as the Breeding Bird Survey and the Wetland Bird Survey (see [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org) for details).

If you've been birdwatching abroad, visit [www.worldbirds.org](http://www.worldbirds.org) and give your sightings to the BirdLife International Partner in that country. Your data could be vital in protecting sites and species in the country you've visited.

## 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:

- 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.
- Twitches 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, which has considerable experience in protecting rare breeding birds, and report it to the County Bird Recorder or the Rare Breeding Birds Panel ([www.rbbp.org.uk](http://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:

- If you twitch a rare bird, park sensibly, follow instructions and consider making a donation if requested.
- Don't get too close for a photograph - you'll earn the wrath of everyone else if you flush the bird out of sight.
- 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.
- Birds should never be flushed in important wildlife habitats or where there are other nesting or roosting birds nearby. Birds should not be flushed more frequently than every two hours nor within two hours of sunrise or sunset, so the bird has chance to feed and rest.

## **The law**

Laws protecting birds and their habitats have helped to secure the conservation of many species. They 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. 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**, disturbance of capercaillie and ruffs at leks is also an offence. It is a criminal offence to disturb intentionally 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 the Magistrates' Court, or an unlimited fine by the Crown Court. In Scotland, the maximum fine on summary conviction is £40,000, or an unlimited fine on conviction on 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.