

How to Become a Good Bird Guide? How do you Select a Good Bird Guide?

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Summary: Key Points on Successful Bird Guiding

Bird Welfare and Ethics are Paramount: The single most important aspect of a good bird guide is having genuine respect for bird welfare and their habitat, prioritising this above all else, including client expectations or financial gain. Guides must practice proper birding ethics to avoid negative impacts on the environment.

Client-Centric Service and People Skills: A successful guide focuses on meeting the diverse needs and expectations of their guests, who may be seeking rare birds, easy sightings, photographs, or just a great experience. This requires being observant, tactful, sociable, and demonstrating a genuine interest in making sure guests go home happy. Excellent communication skills and a pleasant personality are crucial.

Expert Knowledge and Field Skills: A guide must be an expert on the local birds, possessing intimate knowledge of their descriptions, behaviour, habitat, and calls/songs to efficiently find target species. Being an overall naturalist with knowledge of local ecology, other wildlife, and even culture enhances the guest experience.

Training and Development are Necessary: While experience, self-learning through field observation and books, and mentorship are common ways to develop skills, there is a call for a formal training course or certification for bird guides. This is seen as useful for ensuring a consistent standard, promoting ethical practices, and fostering a better understanding of science and natural history.

Professionalism and Logistics: A good guide demonstrates professionalism and attention to logistics, including efficiently handling the hassle of arranging accommodation, transportation, and meals. They should also be prepared to manage challenging situations like varying client expectations and, in some cases, communication barriers. Personal recommendation and strong reviews are the primary criteria for a guest choosing a competent guide.

Bird guides are very helpful to birdwatchers and photographers, especially when travelling outside of their usual bird 'patch'. A good bird guide will have the ability to locate hard to find birds, have much knowledge about bird ecology, good communication abilities, birding ethics and the ability to manage group dynamics.

In this article we explore what it takes to become a good bird guide and also offer tips on how to select a good bird guide. We asked a number of bird guides and birders a series of questions on these two subjects and their opinions are summarised below. Three experienced bird guides and four birdwatchers were kind enough to respond.

The opinion here may help those hoping to become bird guides as well as those trying to decide how to choose a guide.



Plate 1: AI generated image to depict a bird guide in action.

Questions posed to Bird Guides on “How to Become a Good Bird Guide?”

What do you consider the most important aspects/skills of being a good & successful bird guide?

- Liew A good bird guide doesn't just find birds. They ensure they meet the needs of their guests. What may seem rare to us may just be a bird addition to a guest's bird list.
- John Top priority is genuinely/sincerely respect birds (welfare) as important as human beings (ethics). Then followed by professionalism; skills, knowledge, communication, career development, etc.
- Jason Be observant of your client's needs and tactful whilst balancing your skills in bird identification through sight and sound. It is good to have quality sport optics.

How did you develop your bird guide skills? Did you require any training? Should there be a formal training course for bird guides?

- Liew This is purely based on birding experience and some basic training provided by the company.
- John Mentored by knowledgeable visiting experts and self-learned (field observation & books). With informal/on-the-job training by a few retired



birders on multiple disciplines. A training course is required; some form of certification of standard or better understanding (science & natural history) and ethics is needed, so as not to cause a negative impact or unwanted practices.

Jason I started with a borrowed binocular and the Blue-throated Bee-eater was the 'spark bird', shown by a good friend of mine, Jollence in Tuaran in 2003. I am self-taught from bird books and the Internet. It's good to have a formal training course locally for future bird guides with the assistance from the government.

What are the major challenges of working as a bird guide?

Liew One of the biggest challenges as a bird guide is not just finding the birds, but how to manage different guest expectations - some want rare birds, some prefer easy ones, some are photographers, others are listers. We always try to plan ahead, adjust along the way, and make sure everyone goes home happy with good sightings, good photos, and a great experience.

John Handling various clients' perspectives and expectations that may go against birds' welfare.

Jason Uncertainty in future bookings for those working as freelancers.

Any tips for those aspiring to become a bird guide?

Liew Birding is more than just spotting birds - it's about sharpening your skills, learning the how, what, and where of each bird. Along the way, we also build patience... and improve how we connect with people too!

John Please respect birds' welfare and their habitat.

Jason Be yourself and respect the people and nature around us.

Any other comments?

Liew One of the biggest challenges in bird guiding is finding the right balance - meeting customer expectations while still respecting nature and wildlife ethics. It's not just about the perfect photo, but also about protecting the birds and their habitat for the future.

John Client's money never tops the birds' welfare.

It is interesting to note that all three bird guides have stressed the need for bird ethics while managing the client's expectations. Being knowledgeable about nature and culture, not just about the birds, is as important as finding the 'target' birds (Dragan 2014). Good birdwatchers know there are no guarantees and this is not always appreciated by those trying to photograph a bird. I (Amar) once joined a bird guide in a foreign country who, prior to me, had a client who insisted on him 'producing' 20 good birds everyday that he could photograph well; a major stress and not definitely not a repeat client.



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Plate 2: It is highly unlikely that this Sunda Scops-Owl *Otus lempiji* could be seen & imaged at night without the help of a local bird guide. Sungai Kapur FR, Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia, March 2025.

As bird guides have grown in number, it would be useful, as suggested, for some organised training and perhaps even some certification. However, this should not hinder the growth of self-grown bird guides with in-depth local experience. There are a number of bird guide certification courses offered in industrialised nations. The National Audubon Society in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank have produced both a basic and advanced level bird guide training curriculum (Sterling *et al.* 2015a, 2015b). These are very comprehensive and could be used as good references for the development of local training guides. Another training guide available online is one for use in rural communities. It is interesting to note that these bird guide training curricula not only cover bird identification and tools of the trade but also guiding skills, ethics, group management and business skills.

It is important to get end-user perspectives on bird guides. Their opinions are outlined below.

Questions posed to Birders on "How do you Select a Good Bird Guide?"

How do you choose a good bird guide? What are your criteria? What should we look for in a bird guide?

Shafeeq & Mizun The first line of enquiry would be through birders in the area, Facebook being a good place to start in finding an appropriate Group. Personal recommendation would definitely be the thing to look for, and we have found



that the community of birders is always very willing to give time and effort to newcomers. When asking of a birding group, multiple recommendations for the same person would be a very good indicator that this is the guide to go to. This sort of approach will also often lead to direct offers of personal company on a birding visit, rather than simply giving contact details for a professional guide. This is certainly how we have responded on various occasions. It is fun showing visitors around the areas that we are so familiar with, especially those from overseas. We have done this for people from India and UK, taking them to Panty and Fraser's Hill. Being there with someone new to the place makes you appreciate it more yourself.

Kuan Yaow The guide must be the expert on the birds in the area with intimate knowledge of descriptions of birds, their behaviour, habitat and range, songs and calls. So that he/she can find the targets whilst practising proper birding ethics. Able to show images of birds on the wish-list on his phone. An overall naturalist with knowledge of the ecology of the area, the vegetation and other wildlife like snakes, mammals, insects. etc. Also able to explain a bit about the local culture of the area. Of course, arrange for decent accommodation, transportation and meals. Personality of bird guide: Must show passion and enthusiasm in his chosen field. A people person who has a genuine interest in making sure the guests get whatever they are hoping for. Be helpful and encouraging when the going gets tough especially when dealing with older guests. Does not charge astronomical eye watering fees. Bird guides are chosen based on reviews and the recommendation of friends.

Teoh The choice of a bird guide really depends on many criteria for me. Since we are investing time and resources for a trip, it is just as important to get a competent bird guide to add the icing to the cake. Often, I play the guide for my group of birdwatchers. Knowing their needs (for accommodation, food and travel modes) comes first and it is then followed by what they expect of the trip – bird count and lifers. As such, choosing a suitable bird guide is very personal. There has to be chemistry between the bird guide and our group. The guide must be knowledgeable in the area we are heading for. As for chemistry, I supposed we look for a sociable guide; but not too quiet nor too chatty. His local knowledge is important and his connections to the people on the ground is just as crucial. When all of the above is satisfactorily met, then comes the question of costing/pricing. This is important so as not to burst our budgets but at the same time not be too unfair to the guide. From a personal perspective, I prefer a bird guide who also takes photographs. This is important. This will give us the assurance that we won't just be hearing the bird; seeing the bird from afar and that we will get to photograph a bird in the right place and the best composition.

How have you benefited by using a bird guide?

Shafeeq & Mizun We have only employed professional guides on two occasions, both on a visit to Sabah. Going to Danum Valley was a high-cost trip and we felt it important to make the most of the opportunity. Also, we were aware that outside the main trails, it was required to have a guide in any case. On that occasion the



Rainforest Lodge provided a guide (plus a trainee guide as well) for the 5 days. They were excellent, and found all the birds that we had hoped to see – and more – becoming real friends by the end of the trip. The other place on the same trip was Mount Kinabalu. Again, we were aware that there were many species there that we had not seen and, more importantly, would not easily recognise if we did. On this occasion, the birding group recommendations all pointed to the same man, and he not only spotted and identified a large number of species, but also knew the locals and arranged transport to the top of the road, so that we only had to walk down! With a few hours of his full day employment left, and the mountain birds going quiet after mid-day, he was also willing to add on an unexpected visit to a paddy field area.

Kuan Yaow Able to photograph many more birds during a birding trip since a bird guide will bring guests to the exact spots at the best time birds are active. Less time and energy wasted trying to seek out targets. Bird guides are able to get up-to-date info from his contacts in the area. Hassle of arranging accommodation, transport and meals are handled efficiently by guides so guests can just concentrate on enjoying the birding experience.

Teoh Using the criteria above, I have engaged several bird guides over the years, some locally and some in neighbouring countries. I remember a trip to the northern border. We had engaged a Thai bird guide who picked us up after the border crossing before heading off to our destination for a day-trip. He was friendly and cheerful as well as thoughtful – stopping to get provisions and meals for us before heading into the port for the day. He made our journey experiential – sharing local stories and what to expect at the port. Throughout the day, he was with us taking great pains that we got what we came to get. Local guides are quite similar for me. I found our guide for a day-trip to Taman Negara eye-opening as he was very friendly from the start; resourceful; patient and able to improvise. Since the target birds appeared earlier than expected, we had time on our hands. Our guide took us on a ride into the park and shared his insights on the area and was more than happy to oblige our occasional holler to stop the vehicle for a quick shot of a bird. Overall, yes, we have benefitted from having a bird guide with us.

What challenges have you encountered with bird guides?

Shafeeq & Mizun The main thing that we found, when using a guide, is that, with everything being identified for us, and sometimes in quick succession, we did not really look carefully at the birds that were pointed out. So, although we had technically recorded seeing a lifer, we did not have photos and didn't have a clear idea of what the bird looked like. Overload of information, and pressure to move on and find the next target!

Kuan Yaow Communication difficulties due to language barriers when bird guides are less competent in English. After booking with a particular birding company, a random bird guide is assigned to the birders; and his performance is well below expectations.

Teoh Thus far, my experience with bird guides I have engaged has been pleasant. But this is not so with other bird guides who happen to be at a location with



their clients. Some are obnoxious, arrogant and very unfriendly. They would try to take control of a port just for the benefit of their clients without consideration for others who are there. Some guides even chop off tree branches, remove shrubs and destroy the natural environment just to ensure their clients get a clean clear shot of the target bird.

Any other comments?

- Shafeeq & Mizun I should say that our direct experience with using bird guides is very limited. However, on the few occasions when we have elected to make the (sometimes considerable) investment, we have had good experiences. I think the decision to use a guide is a very personal thing. Mostly we are happy to explore new areas on our own, at our own pace, enjoying the little thrills of seeing and identifying new birds. Using a guide will certainly increase your chances of recording a longer list of sightings, but may also mean that you do not fully enjoy the simple pleasure of being in a new birding location, with the hope of an exciting lifer!
- Kuan Yaow To secure the services of a competent, reliable and helpful guide, always choose based on the recommendations of birder friends who have used the person before.
- Teoh Bird guides are important. But I have observed that the Department of Wildlife and National Parks has stopped organising courses to recruit more bird guides. I once enquired about the course several years back and only got a reply – we will get back to you when we organise one. It's been several years and there was no further word. I believe we should continue to grow the number of bird guides in the country. Competent bird guides can be nurtured to further protect our natural environment while they play the role of nature ambassadors with the right ethics and practices.

As can be seen from the opinions, different birdwatchers have different expectations and needs – something that a good bird guide should clarify before even taking up the task. Birders often rely on colleagues to give recommendations of bird guides to use – emphasising that the 'word-of-mouth' portal is a powerful one. An enjoyable experience with a guide, results in that guide getting more and repeat business. It is interesting to note that birders also act as informal, unpaid bird guides, and often enjoy the experience.

The growth of bird hides to enable bird photography has, to some extent, degraded the richness of the bird guide experience. But not every bird species will use a feeding station and guides are still in demand to find uncommonly seen birds.

We hope this dialogue serves as sounding-board for those thinking of embarking on a part-time or full-time career as a bird guide, as well as those deciding how to choose a guide.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Wai-Mun Choy for reviewing the article and offering useful suggestions.

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Citation: Amar-Singh HSS, Liew WK, John Bakar, Jason Bugay Reyes, Shafeeq Wilson, Mizun Tan, Kuan-Yaow Poon & Teik-Hoong Teoh (2025). How to Become a Good Bird Guide? How do you Select a Good Bird Guide? *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 4/2025, Dec 2025: pg. 124-131.