

**Tips & Tools to Aid Birdwatching & Bird Photography Series:
Guideline for Developing & Maintaining Ethical Bird Hides**

John Bakar, in cooperation with Sabah Birdwatchers Association

Traditionally, bird hides have been set up to provide a concealed vantage point for birdwatching, photography, and research, allowing birdwatchers and ornithologists to observe birds in their natural habitats without causing undue disturbance (Plate 1). Increasingly they are being used by bird photographers and for ecotourism. The ability to get closer to birds and to appreciate bird biodiversity up close is a powerful draw.



Plate 1: An AI generated image of a bird hide for illustration purposes only.

However, the very presence and operation of bird hides, if not carefully considered, can inadvertently lead to negative impacts on the birds they are designed to observe. Unethical practices, such as locating hides too close to sensitive nesting sites, attracting birds with inappropriate food or allowing excessive noise and movement from observers, can cause stress, disrupt breeding cycles, alter natural behaviours and even lead to abandonment of territories. This underscores the critical need for an ethical framework governing the design, placement, and management of bird hides (BirdLife South Africa 2013).

An ethical bird hide prioritises the well-being of the birds and the integrity of their habitat above all else. Key principles include minimising disturbance through careful siting, ensuring appropriate viewing distances, employing sound-dampening materials, and educating visitors on responsible behaviour. This extends to photography, where the pursuit of the perfect shot must never compromise the welfare of the subject (National Audubon Society 2023). Furthermore, ethical hide management often involves habitat enhancement around the hide, such as planting native vegetation to provide food and shelter, and implementing waste management protocols to prevent pollution.

In essence, the concept of an ethical bird hide transforms these structures from mere observation points into active instruments of conservation. By providing controlled viewing opportunities, they can reduce the overall human impact on sensitive areas, channelling visitor pressure away from more vulnerable sites. They also serve as vital educational tools, raising awareness about avian ecology, conservation challenges and the importance of responsible wildlife interaction. When managed ethically, hides become platforms for citizen science, enabling the collection of valuable data on bird populations and behaviours without undue interference, while allowing for ecotourism.

The future of birdwatching and avian conservation increasingly relies on the widespread adoption and adherence to these ethical principles, safeguarding both the birds we value and the habitats they call home.

This article provides a guideline for the development and maintenance of ethical bird hides in the Borneo rainforest but would be applicable to other parts of the country.

1.0 Ethical Considerations

1.1 Minimise Disturbance:

- The primary goal is to observe birds without disrupting their natural behaviour. Locate your hide in an area where birds naturally congregate, avoiding nesting sites or areas of critical habitat.
- Keep noise levels to an absolute minimum during construction and while in the hide.

1.2 Environmental Impact:

- Use sustainable and locally sourced materials whenever possible. Avoid materials that could leach harmful chemicals into the soil or water.
- Design the hide to blend seamlessly with the surrounding environment. Use natural camouflage and avoid bright colours.
- Ensure the hide does not obstruct natural animal pathways or alter water flow.

1.3 Respect for Wildlife:

- Never bait or lure birds to the hide in a way that could endanger them or alter their natural feeding patterns. (Subject to further discussion, if allowed feeding, within expert and authority stipulation).
- Maintain a safe distance and avoid any actions that could cause stress or fear to the birds.
- Limit the number of people using the hide at any one time to reduce disturbance.

1.4 Local Regulations and Permission (Ordinance & Enactment):

KEPKAS (Written Permit)

i. Forestry Department

ii. Sabah Parks

iii. Wildlife Department

iv. Sabah Tourism Board.

'Multilayer sustainable operation standard adhered'.

- Before beginning any construction, obtain the necessary permits and permissions from local authorities and landowners.
- Respect the regulations of any protected areas or nature reserves.
- It is very important to consider the impact to the local ecosystem, and if possible, to consult with local expert guides, and or park rangers.

2.0 Construction Guidelines



Plate 2: An AI generated image of a bird hide for illustration purposes only.

2.1 Location:

- Choose a location near a reliable water source, feeding area, or known bird activity hotspot.
- Consider the direction of sunlight to avoid glare and ensure good visibility.
- The lay of the land can be used to your advantage, using natural features such as fallen logs or existing vegetation to help with the construction and camouflage.

2.2 Materials:

- Use natural materials such as bamboo, wood, and woven palm leaves.
- Consider using recycled or repurposed materials.
- Ensure all materials are sturdy and weather-resistant.

2.3 Design:

- Build a simple, inconspicuous structure with small viewing windows or slots.
- Provide comfortable seating and adequate space for observers and equipment.
- Ensure the hide is well-ventilated to prevent overheating.
- Path or Trail design to adhere to safety standards. All age and physical abilities friendly (BirdLife South Africa 2013).

2.4 Camouflage:

- Use natural vegetation, such as leaves, branches, and vines, to camouflage the exterior of the hide.
- Avoid using shiny or reflective materials.

3.0 Trail construction

Building a trail to a bird hide in Sabah that prioritises safety and accessibility requires careful planning and execution, especially considering the region's diverse terrain and climate. Here's a breakdown of essential considerations:

3.1 Trail Design and Construction (Surface):

** For accessibility, a smooth, firm, and stable surface is crucial. Options include:*

- Compacted gravel: Provides a stable surface with good drainage.
- Wooden boardwalks: Ideal for wet or uneven terrain, and offer a level surface. Ensure they are built with durable, rot-resistant wood.
- Concrete or paved pathways: Suitable for areas with high traffic, but may be less natural-looking.

3.2 Width:

- The trail should be wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and other mobility devices, as well as two-way traffic.
- A minimum width of 1.2 meters is generally recommended.

3.3 Gradient:

- Minimise steep slopes to make the trail accessible to people with mobility impairments.
- Where slopes are unavoidable, provide resting areas at regular intervals.
- Adhere to recommended maximum gradients for wheelchair accessibility.

3.4 Drainage:

- Proper drainage is essential to prevent water accumulation and slippery surfaces. In Sabah's high-rainfall environment, this is particularly important.
- Consider using drainage ditches or culverts to divert water away from the trail.

3.5 Edge Protection:

- Install edge protection, such as railings or curbs, to prevent falls, especially along elevated sections or steep slopes.

3.6 Signage:

Provide clear and informative signage, including:

- Trail distances and difficulty levels.
- Warnings about potential hazards.
- Information about the bird hide and the surrounding environment.

3.7 Safety Standards Risk Assessment:

Conduct a thorough risk assessment to identify potential hazards, such as:

- Slippery surfaces.

- Uneven terrain.
- Wildlife encounters.
- Falling branches

3.8 Regular Maintenance:

Establish a regular maintenance schedule to ensure the trail remains in good condition. This includes:

- Clearing debris.
- Repairing damaged sections.
- Inspecting and maintaining railings and other safety features

3.9 Emergency Preparedness:

- Develop an emergency response plan in case of accidents or injuries.
- Ensure that first-aid supplies are readily available.
- Establish clear communication protocols.

3.10 Disabled-Friendly Considerations (see BirdLife South Africa 2013 for ideas):

Making hides universally accessible means making them accessible to everyone regardless of their physical, sensory or cognitive abilities. Although usually applied to persons with disabilities, universally accessible hides will also benefit the elderly and children.

- Improve the bird hide to ensure that it is accessible to people with disabilities, with features such as ramps or level entrances, adequate space for wheelchairs and lowered viewing windows.
- Resting Areas: Provide benches or seating areas at regular intervals along the trail.
- Tactile Indicators: Install tactile indicators to help visually impaired visitors navigate the trail.
- Audio Information: Consider providing audio information about the bird hide and the surrounding environment.



Plate 3: An AI generated image of a bird hide for illustration purposes only.

3.11 Environmental Considerations:

- Minimise Environmental Impact:
 - i. Design the trail to minimise disturbance to the natural environment.
 - ii. Use sustainable materials and construction techniques.
- Wildlife Protection:
 - i. Avoid disturbing wildlife during trail construction and maintenance.
 - ii. Provide clear signage encouraging visitors to respect wildlife.

3.12 Key Considerations for jungle trail to bird hides in Sabah:

- The tropical climate requires durable materials and effective drainage.
- The diverse terrain may necessitate the use of boardwalks or other specialised construction techniques.
- Wildlife encounters are possible, so it's essential to take precautions and provide clear warnings.
- Consulting with local experts on Sabah's local environments is very important.
- By adhering to these standards, you can create a safe and accessible trail that enhances the bird-watching experience for all visitors.

4.0 Toilet Facilities

Building suitable toilet standards at bird hides in Sabah, especially in remote areas, requires careful consideration of environmental impact, hygiene, and visitor comfort. Here's a breakdown of key factors and environmental considerations:

4.1 Waste Management:

- In many remote locations, traditional sewage systems are impractical. Consider composting toilets or pit latrines designed to minimise environmental contamination.
- Composting toilets offer a sustainable solution, breaking down waste naturally. Ensure proper ventilation and maintenance to prevent odours.
- If pit latrines are used, they must be constructed to prevent groundwater contamination.
- For areas with higher visitor numbers, consider portable chemical toilets, but ensure proper disposal of waste.

4.2 Water Conservation:

- If water is available, use water-saving toilet fixtures.
- Explore rainwater harvesting systems to supplement water supply.

4.3 Material Selection:

- Use durable, weather-resistant materials that blends with the natural environment.
- Prioritise sustainable materials whenever possible.

4.4 Hygiene and Sanitation. Handwashing Facilities:

- Provide handwashing stations with soap or hand sanitiser.
- In remote areas, consider water containers with taps and proper drainage.

4.5 Cleanliness:

- Establish a regular cleaning schedule to maintain hygiene.

- Provide clear signage encouraging visitors to keep the facilities clean.

4.6 Ventilation:

- Ensure adequate ventilation to minimise odours and prevent the buildup of harmful gases.

4.7 Pest Control:

- Implement measures to prevent insects and other pests.

4.8 Visitor Comfort and Privacy:

- Design toilet facilities to provide adequate privacy.

4.9 Accessibility:

- Consider accessibility for visitors with disabilities.

4.10 Shelter:

- Provide shelter from rain and sun.

4.11 Maintenance:

- It is very important to have a plan for the long term maintenance of any toilet facility.

4.12 Location:

- The location of the toilet should be a reasonable distance from the bird hide, to prevent disturbing the wildlife, but not so far that it is an inconvenience.

4.13 Local Regulations and Guidelines:

- Familiarise yourself with local regulations and guidelines regarding sanitation and waste disposal.
- Consult with local authorities and environmental agencies to ensure compliance.

4.14 Key Considerations for building a toilet at bird hides in Sabah:

- Sabah's rainforest environment presents unique challenges, including high humidity and rainfall.
- Remote locations may require innovative solutions for waste management and water supply.
- Tourism is a significant industry in Sabah, so it's essential to maintain high standards of hygiene and environmental protection.
- By carefully considering these factors, you can build toilet standards at bird hides in Sabah that are both functional and environmentally responsible.

5.0 Conclusion, Important Considerations for Sabah Birdwatching Tourism

- The Sabah rainforest is a delicate ecosystem. It's crucial to prioritise conservation and minimise any potential impact.
- Engage with local communities and guides who have extensive knowledge of the area and its wildlife. Their expertise can be invaluable in ensuring ethical and sustainable bird hide construction.

- Places like Danum Valley, and the Trusmadi region are very popular for birding, and already have established bird hides. Visiting these locations, and supporting the local businesses that run them, can be a great way to view the birds, and support ethical tourism.

By following these guidelines, you can create a bird hide that provides excellent viewing opportunities while minimising your impact on the Sabah rainforest and its incredible birdlife. 'Sustainable resources, Sustainable tourism products'.



Plate 4: An AI generated image of a bird hide for illustration purposes only.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Sabah Birdwatchers Association for the encouragement to produce this guideline and Amar-Singh HSS for providing ideas and editorial support. I thank Jia-En Ho, Wai-Mun Choy and Ron Pudín for reviewing the article.

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Citation: Bakar, J. (2025). Guideline for Developing & Maintaining Ethical Bird Hides. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2025, Sept 2025: pg. 78-85.