



Articles

Ornithological Controversies Series: Responsible Observation of Nesting Birds

This is a dialogue on how we can safely watch birds without harming them, especially focused on nesting birds. The dialogue occurred some years back and was updated for this article. Observation of nesting birds can add to the 'science' and aid in our understanding and promote conservation activities. However, some are interested in getting that 'wonderful' adult-feeding-young images. At times a crowd of photographers are seen daily at nesting sites; hence, there is the potential for harm.

Some online groups and databases ban the posting of nest photos. A few only allow posts after the young have fledged. But this has not deterred the imaging and posting of nesting birds on individual online sites. In addition, we have seen unacceptable behaviour of altering the environment around the nest by cutting away leaves or branches.

We need to ask how we can responsibly observe and image nesting birds without harming them. Some opinions from respected ornithologists are presented below. Note that this was a dialogue that took place online, some years ago, among a few of us and has been updated for this article.

Krys Kazmierczak, editor of Oriental Bird Images (OBI) & author of *A Field Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*

I do not particularly encourage nest photography, but if someone should come upon a nest during the course of normal birdwatching and take some photographs quickly, keeping disturbance to a minimum and withdrawing from the scene as rapidly as possible, then I see nothing wrong with that. The aim of OBI was to photo-document all possible aspects of birds and their behaviour. Hence, we did accept nest photographs.

Once we had images of a typical nest for a species, however, I saw little point in adding any more to our database and would discourage anyone from going after additional photos of nests where we already had some. I also try to discourage people from harassing individual birds in order to get a special shot.

It's a difficult topic and many people will have differing views on the issue. Nowadays, I avoid looking for nests at all.

David Wells, author of *The Birds of the Thai-Malay Peninsula Volume 1 & 2*.

As a recorder and collator of natural history information from many hands, I have long been keenly aware of the potential data content of photographs, also of their value as identification back-up. That being the case, I suppose I have always erred on the side of getting the shot rather than withholding, at least whenever the photographer has a suspicion that new information and/or something of special interest might be on offer (and there is always the possibility that the photographer will not have been so aware).

As such, background knowledge plus common-sense come into play. That said, I am not at all in favour of wildlife photo 'stamp-collecting', especially when this becomes competitive and risks

are taken with the security and well-being of subjects, simply to stay ahead of rivals. Potential exposure of nests to predators through undue 'gardening' and other interference just to acquire the needed 'tick' or piece of close-up art, to my mind, in most cases probably cannot be justified.

Codes of practice are hard to formulate, but no-one should take up wildlife photography without making themselves aware of the down-stream damage that can result from selfish actions in pursuit of the ultimate picture.

Slim Sreedharan, field ornithologist and honorary curator of birds at the Sarawak Museum:

(Note: We are sadly aware of Silm's recent demise but the family has kindly allowed us to use his opinion and keep his voice alive in the field he loved.)

The questions posed here are not new to anyone working with wildlife. How we interact with birds, or any animal, rather depends on one's own mindset and needs.

From the scientific point of view, I have been constantly criticised for my reluctance in "collecting" birds as museum specimens. I am a ringer, and I regularly set up nets to trap birds. For me to actually kill a bird I have trapped feels rather like a betrayal of trust, and a breach of the ringer's code of conduct. However, birds do, sometimes, die in the net, or of shock during handling. This has happened to me about fifteen times and, as many more, during training sessions with trainee ringers, during the past forty years. Nearly always, I have generally been so upset by it that I just pack up my nets and go home. The dead bird, however, I prefer not to waste - I usually send the body to the nearest Museum.

Photography is a horse of a different colour. Much of my thoughts on this were set down in a short feature I published many years ago and it was also carried by BESG (Sreedharan 2009). As far as the use of the electronic flash is concerned, it was not something that bothered me too much. I did much of my photography in the pre-digital era, using single-lens reflex cameras with large apochromatic lenses and 35 mm film, and took the pictures from hides as much as ten to thirty feet away from the subject. If at all I used flash, it was largely for fill-in purposes, and it never seemed to have had any effect on birds or their nestlings.

Photographing nestling in dark nest tunnels or tree holes would, of course, necessitate the use of flash. The question for me, then, would be to ask exactly how important the resulting picture will be. Is it to record some hitherto unknown behaviour or activity, or just to add another picture to one's collection, rather like acquiring another trophy? I do not think that one or two pictures will alarm the subject or cause too much damage. They will, naturally, be quite surprised or startled by the sudden burst of bright light and react to it.

Some Guidelines on Observing Nesting Birds:

These guidelines are adapted from the National Audubon Society (2022), Australian BirdLife Photography (2021), and Cornell's NestWatch (2023).

1. Maintain a good distance away from the nest and use a long lens or digiscope device.
2. While you are watching, monitor continually if the adults or chicks show any signs of distress; in which case you should leave or relocate to a further distance. Signs of stress in parents include alarm calls, avoiding delivery of food to nestlings, excessive vocalisation, sitting immobile while incubating,

broken-wing display, etc. In general, if the bird's behaviour appears to be more visible, then it is possibly trying to distract you from the nest area.

3. Limit the duration and frequency of your observations to the minimum required to obtain data regarding nesting behaviour.
4. If data on the nesting behaviour of a particular species is already considerable and well known, consider not observing the nest.
5. Be aware of the risk of alerting predators to the presence of the nest. Avoid using the same route to the nest to avoid leaving a foot or scent trail. Avoid flushing the adults which may leave the young unprotected.
6. Do not alter the environment around the nest by cutting away leaves or branches as it removes essential camouflage and nest protection. The nest may become sufficiently exposed to attract a predator.
7. Do not use a drone for photography or videography as they are known to disturb nesting birds.
8. Do not touch or handle young birds or eggs as this may damage them or result in adults abandoning the nestlings.
9. Do not use bird call playback at the nest location.
10. Generally, avoid using flash on nesting birds. If the nest is in a dark location, e.g. a hollow or cave, aim to take only a single image with flash.
11. Avoid sharing the location of nesting sites openly, as a large number of birdwatchers and photographers may visit. The increased human presence may disturb the birds.
12. When posting or submitting images, include a disclosure or detailed description of your nest observation activities; describing the steps you took to comply with good ethical behaviour.



References

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Citation: Wells, D.R., Kazmierczak, K., Sreedharan, S. & Amar-Singh HSS. (2023). Ornithological Controversies Series: Responsible Observation of Nesting Birds. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2023, December 2023: pg. 38-40.