



BIRDING GUIDELINES IN THE PHILIPPINES

**Biodiversity Management Bureau
Technical Bulletin No. 2017-02**

Cover photo: Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*



Department of Environment and Natural Resources
Biodiversity Management Bureau

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A. RATIONALE

Birding refers to recreational activities involving birds such as birdwatching and photography. From individual hobbyists and bird enthusiasts, to organized volunteer birding clubs and business-oriented bird tourism, birding is an open recreational adventure serving various purposes like simple appreciation of aesthetic values of birds, art photography, and commercial birding tours. There are, however, conservation challenges in recreational birding, including potential negative impacts on birds and their habitat. Moreover, many birding sites occur in areas with regulated access like Protected Areas, areas managed by local authorities and special bodies, and ancestral domains under indigenous cultural communities whose regulations and rights need to be observed and respected. Being mindful of these challenges, birding can have a low impact and offer a rewarding experience for birders as well as to communities who serve as stewards of birds and their habitats.



Waterbird census in Naujan Lake

Thus, this set of guidelines seeks to increase awareness, promote and enjoin the implementation of good practices on birding to uphold the welfare of birds and their habitat, including the adherence to laws and respect for communities. It intends to assist regulators, individual bird hobbyists and enthusiasts, and birding clubs in promoting such endeavors. It is intended that these guidelines will also assist commercial tour operators and volunteer group leaders to organize bird tourism activities that avoid any negative impact on birds while seeking to enhance the experience of their participants.



Mountain White-eye *Zosterops montanus*

B. DEFINITION OF TERMS

1. **Alert distance** – the distance between the bird and an approaching human at which point the bird begins to exhibit alert behaviors – head up to monitor the source of disturbance or it may crouch down for cover while monitoring the disturbance;
2. **Birders** – refer to persons, birding clubs, and tour operators engaged in or organizing birdwatching or bird photography (collectively referred hereafter as “birding”) activities as a hobby or for recreations and/or business/commercial purposes at which the subject of their interests are free-ranging birds anywhere in the country;
3. **Call Playback** – or playback is the act of playing pre-recorded calls or songs;
4. **Flushing** – is the act of driving out birds and/or other wildlife from their hiding place;
5. **Hides** – are permanent, semi-permanent, or portable structures built or set-up with the intention of using the same for occasional, regular or long-term birding activities;
 - 5.1 **Permanent hides** – hides that are built of timber, bricks or concrete which can include fixed seats, elbow rests and viewing slots at various heights.
 - 5.2 **Semi-permanent hides** – hides that are built from light materials such as bamboos and shrubs that can be easily dismantled after the intended monitoring purpose;
 - 5.3 **Temporary blinds or hides** – hides or blinds that are portable, movable, and easily demountable like

camouflage nets or other inconspicuous fabric that can conceal the observer from the target birds. Mobile solid-structure hides such as motor vehicles and boats may be used when appropriate along roads or waterways.

6. **Minimum distance** – the distance between the bird and human at which the birds will tolerate human presence and not exhibit an escape response. Ideally, the minimum distance should be approximately equal to the alert distance;
7. **Natural habitat** – the environment which is inhabited by a particular species, where it lives and where it can find food, shelter, protection and mates for reproduction, and which developed through natural growth rather than design or planning.



Ashy Ground-thrush *Zosterops lateralis*

C. BIRDING GUIDELINES

All birders must observe and comply with the herein birding guidelines.

C.1. General Principles

1. Coordinate with the concerned DENR Regional/Field Offices, Protected Area Offices, local government units and indigenous peoples/ indigenous cultural communities, as the case may be, and submit a full list of birders indicating the team leader and his/her affiliations/group represented as well as the field guides/assistants to the concerned DENR office before conducting any birding activity;
2. Be familiar with birding sites especially in terms of access regulations, local/indigenous communities and their customary traditions and practices, and respect such traditions and practices of indigenous communities;
3. Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, keep distance, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording or filming, etc. Birds respond differently to certain level and types of disturbance. Birders therefore should be familiar with the birds' behavior, including breeding season. They should minimize, if not avoid any birding activities during the bird's breeding season;
4. Maintain an alert distance and set aside the "must see" or "must capture" mentality. Welfare of the birds must be given primary consideration over any personal interest;

5. Support the protection of birds and their habitat by respecting and supporting laws and advocating bird conservation. Further information and guidance can be obtained from concerned DENR Regional/Field Offices, Protected Area Offices, managers of birding sites, and conservation organizations with programs for threatened bird species;
6. Be mindful of the climate and weather environment at the target birding site. Wear appropriate birding attire. Bring appropriate birding and weather protection gear.
7. Be aware of security conditions and adhere to security advisories at all times; and,
8. Ensure that their field guides/assistants adhere to these birding guidelines, where appropriate and applicable.



Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis*

C.2. Specific Birding Guidelines

1. Precautions on the use of bird attractants and devices:

1.1 **Call playback.** As a general rule, the use of call playback for the purpose of locating birds for birding activities is discouraged as it could attract predators and interfere with breeding activity i.e. birds may call off incubation duties, or even abandon the nest.

Call playback may be used for authorized scientific research purposes and other supervised bird documentation activities.

1.2 **Flushing.** Do not deliberately flush birds. Flushing birds uses up vital energy needed for other activities such as locating food, building nest, etc. and can place the bird under undue stress.



Mantanani Scops-owl *Otus mantananensis*

1.3 **Spotlighting for night time and cave birding.**

Birders must adopt a precautionary approach and if necessary, keep the time that a bird is held in the spotlight to a minimum i.e. for seconds rather than minutes. The use of lower intensity spotlights, red filters and directing the light to the side of the subject will help reduce the discomfort to the bird. The well-being of nocturnal, cryptic or cave-dwelling wildlife, which are sensitive to light and other disturbances, must also be considered.

Using a spotlight near a nest must be avoided as it can cause the birds to abandon their nest or the young to fall from the nest.

1.4 **Feeding.** Feeding to attract wild birds in natural habitats is strongly discouraged. Providing food supplies may increase dependence, opens the birds to predation, encourages spread of diseases, and poses a risk of species introduction particularly if live exotic food items are used. Introduction of exotic species anywhere in the country is prohibited under Republic Act 9147. Instead, enhancement of vegetation (native species) is highly encouraged to attract and provide refuge to birds.

2. Avoid handling birds. Birders should never physically touch a bird unless extremely necessary. If it is necessary to touch or move birds, such as in emergency situations (e.g. birds found to have sustained injuries), they should be handled as minimal as possible. When handling birds is inevitable due to such situations, wear gloves to limit the risk of bacterial or viral contamination and quickly put the bird in a safe, calm area where it can recuperate naturally;

3. Stay on roads, trails and paths, and bird hides where they exist; there are many useful birding tools that can bring birders close to the species they observe without interacting with the birds. Zoom cameras and telephoto lenses, binoculars and spotting scopes are useful options. A bit of patience on the part of the birder will help the bird to become accustomed to the birder's presence and it may venture closer on its own;
4. Keep distance from sensitive areas such as nests, roosts, courtship display areas and important feeding sites. If there is an intention of extended observation in such sensitive areas, use a collapsible or temporary blind or hide, and/or take advantage of natural cover along established trails;
5. Only authorities, such as the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB), local government units (LGUs), private land owners, DENR and similar bodies having management jurisdiction over a birding area, can establish permanent and semi-permanent bird hides. The establishment and maintenance of bird hides by authorities is highly encouraged in sensitive areas and areas frequented by birders;
6. The sightings of rare, threatened, previously unrecorded species, significant nests and populations of birds should be divulged to DENR, environment offices of local government units, and recognized conservation, scientific community. Consider the well-being of the birds before any sensitive information is made available to the public. The list of birds found in the Philippines as well as the threatened species can be accessed via www.bmb.gov.ph;

A report form that can be filled out and sent to concerned DENR Regional/Field Offices is attached as Annex "A". The contact details of all DENR Regional/Field Offices can be accessed through the DENR website (www.denr.gov.ph). Filled up forms can also be sent to the Biodiversity Management Bureau through e-mail at wrd@bmb.gov.ph or telephone no. (02) 925-8946;

7. Roosting sites are sensitive to heavy birding and could be easy targets for lawless individuals. Advertising roosting sites is therefore discouraged and should only be reported to DENR, environment offices of local government units, and recognized conservation, scientific community. Birders are encouraged to provide recommendations to properly manage and protect roosting sites;
8. Avoid disturbing or modifying habitats. Stay on established trails and paths. Do not leave litters;
9. Precautions on bird photography:
 - 9.1 Bird species have varied tolerance to humans. Photographers should judiciously observe alert distance. Once the bird is alerted, photographers should slowly pull back;
 - 9.2 Use a lens of sufficient focal length to avoid approaching the subject too closely;
 - 9.3 As a general rule, photography of active nests is discouraged as adult birds tend to abandon nest, damage eggs or knock out young birds when suddenly disturbed. Photography of active nests may be undertaken only with extreme caution taking into consideration the following:

- Be aware of recommended distance for non-intrusive nest photography for certain group of birds. For raptors, the recommended distance from the nest is at least 100 meters. A distance of at least 200 meters for observing active Philippine Cockatoo nests is recommended¹.
- Always use hides for active nest photography. Avoid lingering around nests or core territories;
- Limit the number of photographers per site at a given time;
- Modification to the nest or its approaches to force the bird into a more photogenic position is unacceptable and must not be done.

9.4 Photographers should use artificial light (e.g. flash, strobes and similar light sources) cautiously and sparingly for filming or photography.

¹ Distance to nesting sites of Philippine Cockatoo should be at least 200 m. The same distance applies to communal roost and feeding sites, unless birds are accustomed to human presence. For feeding sites in Panacan, Narra, a distance of at least 30 m should be kept; more if birds are alerted to the observer. The only known roost sites close to human settlements are situated in Balabac and Dumaran; a distance of at least 50m should be kept for these sites and further if birds are alerted by the observer.

C.3. Respect for Laws and Rights of People and Communities

1. Do not enter private property without the owner's explicit permission;
2. Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas;
3. Practice common courtesy in interactions with other people. When visiting popular birding locations, share the best views with other birders and avoid any behavior that may disrupt birds or distract other birders. Keep conversation to a minimum, turn off mobile phones and avoid using flash photography that may disturb birds or other birders' viewing devices;
4. Secure permission from authorities when birding in natural parks and other managed birding sites and adhere to visitor management regulations;
5. Secure permission from tribal leaders when birding in areas covered by indigenous communities or ancestral domains. Respect their traditions and local regulations, if any.

C.4. Group Birding Ethics

Commercial and volunteer tour group operators have a responsibility to promote ethical birding and to educate their participants on issues pertaining to bird conservation. Commercial and volunteer tour group operators should observe the following:

1. **Lead by example and know your audience.** Follow and promote these Guidelines and encourage participants to do the same. Before setting out on an excursion, find out the level of knowledge and experience within the group you are leading. This will provide a good platform to promote the principles of ethical birding and to publicize the issues pertaining to bird conservation at a level commensurate to the group.
2. **Report bird sightings.** Commercial tour operators, birding groups, and volunteer guides should take advantage of their repeated visits to a particular location to contribute information to ornithological databases and ongoing studies. They are also in an ideal position to see and report problems, which affect the survival of birds and their livelihood, e.g. illegal bird trapping or environmental degradation, in addition to other sensitive information mentioned in item C.2.6 hereof;

Group leaders and tour operators bear a special responsibility to place the welfare of birds and the benefits of public knowledge ahead of the company's



Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana*

interests or group's bird watching needs, while being cautious in displaying any sensitive information to the public. Ideally, leaders should keep track of tour sightings, document unusual occurrences, and submit records to the DENR and/or local authorities (Please see Annex "A" for the report form).

3. **Impart knowledge.** In order to provide a satisfying experience for all participants without damaging the location being visited, group leaders should:

- Seek to impart accurate information to participants in such a way that appreciation and respect for the places visited is enhanced;
- Educate participants on the importance of following the ethical birding principles;
- Promote an understanding of the area visited and the issues that affect the management and long-term protection of the area; and
- Help participants understand the factors that contribute to the decline of bird populations or that increase the risk of species extinction and their role in ensuring the long-term survival of birds, in particular and wildlife, in general

4. **Get involved.** When the opportunity arises, the tour operator or volunteer leader should also seek to:

- Involve participants in activities that have a positive impact on the location being visited (e.g. removal and proper disposal of non-biodegradable materials that may be seen in site);
- Encourage participants to record observations, which may contribute to the overall understanding of the area being visited;
- Use local businesses to provide services for the tour group. By supporting local services, local

communities are given an additional incentive to conserve their natural environment.

C.5. Competitive Birding

The precautionary principle should be applied when organizing or participating in events such as bird races and big years to limit the stress to the environment. Event organizers should incorporate birding guidelines enumerated in this Technical Bulletin into their event mechanics. Organizers should also strive to minimize density of participants in birding event sites to reduce impact to the birds and habitats.



Waterbird census training in Kabankalan Watershed, Negros Occidental

D. MONITORING

All the DENR Regional and Field Offices are advised to closely monitor the birding activities in their areas of jurisdiction and ensure that the herein guidelines are observed. Conservation groups and private individuals are encouraged to report to the DENR and/or local authorities any birders whose acts do not conform to the herein guidelines.

This Technical Bulletin is issued and circulated for the information and guidance of all concerned.

THERESA MUNDITA S. LIM

ANNEX A

DENR Report Form for Bird Sightings

Please submit the accomplished form to a DENR field office nearest you (addresses of DENR field offices can be viewed at www.denr.gov.ph/about-us/directory), or email to: wrd@bmb.gov.ph

OBSERVER INFORMATION	
Name	
Address	
Affiliation (if there's any)	
Contact details (telephone/mobile phone/ e-mail address)	
BIRD SIGHTING DETAILS	
WHAT Please state the particular information or incident e.g. sighting of rare or threatened species; any activity that compromises the welfare of the birds (e.g. poaching, habitat destruction, etc.) and give the following details: 1. Species : (Please state common name and scientific name. If unknown/unidentified species, give a full description or illustration/photo of the bird) 2. Number of Individuals 3. Activity of the bird/s when seen and other associated information [e.g. perching at about 5m	

<p>above the ground on a tree (specify tree species as possible)]</p> <p>4. Description of the activity that compromises the welfare of the bird/s and person/s responsible for such activity</p> <p>Please use separate sheet if necessary.</p>	
<p><u>WHERE</u></p> <p>Please state the location of the bird species sighted/incident encountered with the following details:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sitio/ Barangay, City/ Municipality, and Province Habitat (E.g. forest, lake, river, residential area, paddy field, etc.) Geographical coordinates of the location of the observer, if possible Approximate distance and direction of the sighting/incident encountered from the observer (e.g. 20 m NE) 	
<p><u>WHEN</u></p> <p>Please state the date when the bird/s were observed with the following information:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Date (month, day, and year) 	

2. Time of observation 3. Duration of observation 4. Weather conditions	
<u>OTHER INFORMATION</u> Please provide other information that you would like to report/share.	
Submitted to : (Specific DENR Regional/ Field Office)	
<hr/> Full name and Signature of Observer	

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This booklet is produced by the Biodiversity Management
Bureau and the Biodiversity Conservation Society of the
Philippines.

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