

V1 - OCT 2021

# WATCHING WILDLIFE ON FOOT

BEST PRACTICE





# INTRODUCTION

Wild Scotland is the Scottish Wildlife and Nature Tourism Operators Association. We represent wildlife tourism companies across Scotland, all of whom are passionate about Scotland's wildlife. These guidelines provide advice on best practice for wildlife tourism companies whose aims are to provide an enjoyable and memorable wildlife watching experience whilst minimising the impact on the nature and wildlife.

This document is part of the Wild Scotland Best Practice Guideline Series. More details about other guidelines in the series can be found at [www.wild-scotland.co.uk](http://www.wild-scotland.co.uk)

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## 1. GENERAL

- All relevant insurances, policy statements (e.g. Health and Safety, Child Protection) and staff disclosures and qualifications should be available for inspection by competent authorities.
- Guides are encouraged to gain appropriate professional qualifications, such as guiding or mountain leader qualifications or 'Leave No Trace' accreditation (see [Wild Scotland website](#) for further information).
- Be aware of local codes of conduct or sensitive areas and adjust your activities accordingly.
- Guests should be reminded not to leave any litter.
- Guests should be encouraged to provide feedback on their tour. Where possible, this should be recorded.

## 2. RESPONSIBLE PROFESSIONAL WILDLIFE WATCHING

In order to provide a safe, professional and responsible wildlife watching experience, Wild Scotland recommends that all members follow the guidelines below, in addition to the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) and [Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code](#) with which they should be thoroughly familiar.

### Wild Scotland recommends:

- Above all, you should set a good example. If you disturb wildlife, your guests and others watching you will think it is acceptable to do the same. If in doubt, back off and provide an explanation to you guests.
- Do not be tempted to get too close because your guests ask you too. The most genuine wildlife encounters are those where the animals are behaving naturally, so keep your distance.
- Follow the advice in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code about running a business which utilises access rights. Contact the land manager for advice on minimising your impact on land management activities, the environment and other people.
- Keep to paths and routes that avoid disturbance to wildlife wherever possible. Be aware that regular use of routes can lead to wildlife becoming accustomed to your presence, but that over-use of routes could drive sensitive wildlife away from the area. Use your judgement and ask experts if in doubt.
- Consider the size of your group in relation to the sensitivity of the situation.

- Do not deliberately identify nest sites of rare or protected species; avoid them if possible.
- Keep a good lookout. As soon as you see wildlife, start to assess how you are interacting with it and whether it is showing signs of disturbance (e.g. 'heads up' responses, alarm calls, sudden movements or aggressive behaviour). Ideally, the guide should be able to move the group away before any signs of disturbance are seen, but must certainly do so at the first signs.
- Where possible, make use wildlife watching hides to observe species.
- Use binoculars or telescopes to get better views, rather than getting too close.
- If you approach animals, do so slowly and cautiously. Make sure that your movements are steady and predictable and do not approach directly. Never approach apparently lone young animals.
- Take extra care during sensitive times of year in places where animals may be feeding, resting, breeding, on the nest or with their young.
- Keep your guests together in sensitive areas so you can advise on suitable behaviour as needed.
- Avoid boxing animals in. If other people are watching the same animals try and ensure that you all stay on the same side. Allow animals a safe escape route.
- Do not come between mothers and their young. Avoid splitting up groups of animals.
- If animals move on, do not follow.
- If you lift rocks do so carefully, and put them back in the same place.
- If camping, follow the Mountaineering Council of Scotland's [guide to Wild Camping](#) and make sure that you do not pitch your tent close to dens, otter holts or sites used by birds for nesting or roosting.
- Do not use pre-recorded bird sounds to attract birds and carefully consider the implications of using feeders.
- Dogs should not generally be taken on specialist wildlife-watching trips as chances of seeing wildlife will be reduced, the probability of disturbing wildlife will be increased and it does not set the best example.
- Do not allow flash photography around wildlife. Encourage guests to find out how to turn off automatic flash settings on cameras.
- Sightings of key or unusual species should be recorded and submitted to a recognised sightings database (see WildScotland website for further information).
- If you see anyone intentionally disturbing or harassing wildlife make written notes and report the incident to the local Police Wildlife Liaison Officer with details such as vehicle type and registration.



Box 1

## GETTING THINGS OFF TO A GOOD START

Guests should feel welcome and involved in the walk. A briefing should be provided at the start of each trip to let guests know what to expect.

Key information should include:

- A welcome and introduction of team if appropriate.
- Details of the trip and itinerary.
- Basic housekeeping (comfort and lunch stops etc.).
- Safety instructions.
- Information on what you are likely to see during the trip (do not build up unreasonable expectations).
- Any other issues relevant to the trip relating to conservation, safety, behaviour, codes etc.
- The opportunity to ask questions.

### 3. GOOD GUIDING AND SAFETY

- The guide should provide a brief and friendly introduction at the start of a trip (see Box 1).
  - The guide should be approachable, helpful and willing to speak to people and answer questions.
  - The guide should be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subject.
  - When speaking to the group, ensure that everyone can hear. The best way to check is to ask.
  - Encourage people to get involved with looking for species. It helps keep guests engaged during the trip. Guests should be told about, or have information available on the natural history and behaviour of species which are likely to be seen (see Box 2). It is not acceptable to merely point out species.
- to obstruct or prevent any wild bird from using its nest;
  - to intentionally or recklessly harass any wild bird included in Schedule 1 of the 1981 Act;
  - to take, damage or destroy or otherwise interfere with the nest or nest sites of birds included on schedule A1 of the 2004 Act (presently this only applies to the white-tailed sea eagle);
  - to harass birds listed on schedule 1A of the 2004 Act (presently this only applies to the white-tailed sea eagle);
  - to uproot any wild plant, unless this is accidental or permission has been given by the owner of occupier of the land;
  - to pick or destroy a specially protected plant;
  - to kill, injure, capture or disturb a specially protected animal or to commit a cruel act to any wild mammal;

### 4. THE LAW AND WILDLIFE

It is your responsibility as a guide to be familiar with the law relating to wildlife. A summary of some of the key elements relating to wildlife law are shown below, but these are not exhaustive and reference should be made to the legislation itself.

It is an offence:

- to take or keep any egg of a wild bird;
  - to take, damage, destroy or otherwise interfere with any nest habitually used by any wild bird included in Schedule 1 of the 1981 Act as amended;
- specific laws also apply to badgers, bats, seals and deer;
  - for further information about wildlife and the law, refer to Scottish Natural Heritage at [here](#) (Note: the site currently being amended and only serves as an introduction. Any decision relating to wildlife law should be based upon appropriate advice).

### 5. FURTHER INFORMATION

See the [Wild Scotland website](#) on for current information.



Box 2

## INSPIRING PEOPLE TO FIND OUT MORE

Where possible, have available:

- Map of the area.
- Identification charts or field guides.
- Species charts in other languages (if relevant).
- Spare binoculars.



# QUESTIONS & CONTACT

Should you have any queries regarding the content of this document, or require clarification on any points, please contact us.

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