

Tips for Managing Observations of Rare Birds

Observing rare birds is an exciting and important activity for many birdwatchers; however, managing access to the site for others to see can be challenging. The following tips may assist discoverers of rare birds to optimize observation opportunities for others while maintaining good will with landowners and fellow birdwatchers.

Is the bird on public property?

This is the easiest situation to manage and the sighting can usually be broadcasted to the entire birding community via email, eBird or other means. **Regardless, it is a good idea to include any restrictions of the property such as hours, parking, fees, etc. Care should be taken if it is suspected the bird may be in breeding status or potentially establishing a population (i.e. not a vagrant), where constant threat of observation may adversely affect this activity.**

If it is a rare or endangered bird, then provide recommendations about not using tapes, iPods, or any other type of disturbance.

Is the bird on private property?

It is usually a good idea to have a local coordinator. Facilitating access to a rarity on private property can be an extremely delicate and stressful job. Officers from local chapters are often best suited to assist by being the local coordinator and can help facilitate access.

There have been references to guidelines provided on bird list-servers; it is very important to point out that neither MOS nor any club has formal authority in such matters. Since each situation is unique, the following are provided as **general recommendations.**

Make contact with the property owner

Remember that the well-being of the bird, the homeowners, and the neighbors are our greatest priorities.

1. Make contact with the property owner and confirm the identification of the bird.
2. Communicate with the homeowners about what could happen and ascertain to what extent they are willing to entertain access for safe observation. Be realistic without being alarmist or unconcerned. Some homeowners for various valid reasons want a small number of visitors or even no visitors. In fact, some landowners consider the presence of a rare bird a threat to the value of their property and their rights in what they can and cannot do.

During the initial visit, good facilitators should do all of the following:

1. Be pleasant and informative.
2. Ensure the bird is documented with photo/video or an in-depth written description to establish the record.
 - a. Bring up the subject of banding if doing so would be useful in identification or have other value. Also suggest that there is a small chance for injury and that the bird might depart after the banding.
 - b. Consider consulting an expert in documenting the identification.
3. Prepare the homeowner for the level of interest and discuss options for how to control the flow of information. Assess owner's interest and privacy requirements to determine agreeable viewing times and access.
4. Look for alternative observation locations such as a public place to view the bird. Suggest possible options based on homeowner's interest.
5. Consider extent of available on-site parking. Ask owners what level of parking is acceptable. Evaluate other locations such as public lots, churches, etc., with shuttle services and schedules.
6. Suggest to the homeowner that they keep a sign-in log for the birders visiting their property.

Note: Recommend using a single primary facilitator/Point of Contact (POC) to avoid confusion and undue stress to the homeowners. The primary purpose of the POC is to be helpful, of course, and the homeowners should do as they please. However, imagine what a mess it could be if you had competing forces disseminating information. A single POC is best for a variety of reasons.

Extreme Options

1. Post the sighting immediately to the list-server or wide email dissemination. Risk: The property is stormed and chaos ensues. The homeowners are overwhelmed. A fence is damaged. The police are called and respond, telling people to move along. The birding community gains a poor reputation and individuals are publicly castigated for insensitivity to the community and the well-being of the bird.

2. Keep it nearly entirely secret and arrange only enough access to document and confirm its identification. Risk: Personal, permanent animosity from fellow birders who may believe it was unreasonable to not try to help others see the bird. After all, in most cases, SOME visitation is easily arranged. Many homeowners love sharing their visitor. Some have gone on to become active birders and members of their local bird club.

There are many options between those two extreme decisions. Identify a POC to contact the landowner to better understand their individual tolerance level. Keep in mind that this is a balance that requires tact. The more people who know, the higher the chance of disturbance. The fewer people who are granted access the more animosity likely will arise in the birding community. Refrain from informing a favorite list of birders. This will undoubtedly be viewed as favoritism from those not informed.

Better Options

- Begin with a gradual release of information following much discussion with the homeowners. This is more manageable overall, and makes it easier to stop if there is unacceptable disturbance to the homeowners, the neighbors, or the bird. Begin with an initial limited list and gradually allow others while continually assessing landowner's tolerance levels. Ensure this list, however, is developed in a fair way. Consider using the local chapter list or those who have previously expressed interest in rare birds as a base list to work from. Ensure you can defend who gets to see early and who does not.

Since accurate identification of the sighting is paramount, initial access should include individuals that are knowledgeable and can confirm the sighting and ensure correct documentation, if needed. Often it is best getting some people over to get good photos and fully establish the ID. Sometimes, it requires morphometric information that is only acquired through briefly capturing the individual. Here, licensed bird banders should be alerted as early as possible. Everything after this is a service you and the homeowners are doing for the birding community. Hummingbird banders here in Maryland include Bruce Peterjohn, David Holmes, and Joanna Lutmerding.

There are no procedures that will work for all situations. The suggestion that locals should ALWAYS control the situation is probably not correct. Many rare birds have been insufficiently documented and verified by local birders who made poor decisions. However, local chapter officers should know their responsibilities and those in the organization that may be best qualified to document the sighting. When determining the slow release of information, care must be taken in establishing who gets the information and who does not. It is likely there will always be those who are disgruntled because they did not get the information. Does a casual local birder have more "right" to a bird than a passionate field birder who contributes hundreds of eBird reports and extensive rarity documentation regularly? People will argue about these things forever, and this is the part that will rarely be solved to everyone's satisfaction.

Safety Considerations

Sightings near highways or roadways with insufficient space for parking and observations suggest that the location may be one that is inherently too dangerous. If permission to park off the roadway is not granted or if alternative safe observation locations cannot be found, dissemination of the sighting is contraindicated.

Wrapping Up

- Recognize the homeowners for their cooperation with some form of recognition (e.g., an award, MOS certificate, a field guide, or bird club membership).
- Submit details to the MD/DC Records Committee and eBird. (eBird reports should be postponed until the bird is public knowledge – see below.)

Inputting into eBird

Generally wait at least seven days after the confirmation before entering your checklists into eBird. Earlier entry may be appropriate if public access is not a problem, or if the bird has left the premises. If the bird is, indeed, gone, ensure this information is also provided.

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