Wild in the Woods

Outdoor Manners

by Carol A. Heiser
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Learning to respect nature and wildlife is the first step in becoming a responsible wildlife watcher. The old adage "look, but don't touch" is always a rule you should follow when encountering wildlife.

Anyone who's a fan of Judith Martin's "Miss Manners" national newspaper column knows that there are rules for proper etiquette in every social situation. However, much less has been written about the rules for how we behave towards nature when we're visiting the great outdoors. Alas, "gentle reader," there is indeed a right and a wrong way to conduct yourself among the wild creatures that fly, run or crawl when you're out hiking, bird watching, boating, fishing, or otherwise enjoying outdoor pursuits. Responsible wildlife watchers conscientiously observe a code of viewing ethics to minimize disturbance to animals and ensure that wildlife is unharmed. These ethics are straightforward and based on knowledge about how wildlife is likely to respond to our actions. Just like the common courtesies we show at Aunt Sally's tea party, wildlife viewing ethics are based on respect and consideration.

Too Close for Comfort

Wildlife watchers spend billions of dollars every year on pursuits related to bird watching, hunting, fishing, nature photography, ecotourism, and other aspects of outdoor recreation. Many people enjoy seeing wildlife up close and personal, and they seek out firsthand experiences which a TV program simply could not rival. Sometimes people get carried away and venture too close for comfort—theirs or the animal's.

Numerous instances have been documented when someone has been wounded or killed because they did not respect a safe distance from wild animals. There's the case of the woman who encouraged her daughter to walk up to a beaver so the mother could take their picture: the beaver bit the girl's leg and caused extensive injury. I've seen video clips in which a female moose, frequenting an urban area, stomped to death an unwary pedestrian who did not realize her calf was nearby, and a bison in a national park tossed a tourist in the air when the man tried to sneak around a tree and take the animal's picture. In almost all cases, a wild animal that feels threatened will either try to run away or will attack. Whether or not the person intended to threaten the animal doesn't matter; a wild animal's behavior is unpredictable and may not necessarily "make sense" to us.

Impacts of Contact

Fortunately, the above examples are extreme cases, and ordinary interactions between wildlife and humans usually have little or no consequence to people. However, there is often a subtle effect produced in an animal, such as a physiological or behavioral response, that may not be readily apparent to us. Stress to an animal is not always visible: its heart rate may rise, for example, or it may stop feeding for a short period of time. One bird may leave its nest or abandon its young altogether if harassed enough, while another might use a great deal of valuable energy continuously defending its territory against human intruders. If too many people are walking or driving dune buggies along a beach in the vicinity of nesting shorebirds, for instance, the eggs in the nests can overheat while the parent birds are busy running about from all the commotion around them. There is also evidence that human activity attracts predators and leads them to nests.

The extent of wildlife impact depends on the level of tolerance or habituation to people, the type of threat perceived, and the degree to which people are present or are causing a disturbance. Bald eagles nesting near an interstate may be unfazed by the noise of steady traffic because they have become acclimated to it. In contrast, if the nest were located along a quiet, infrequently used gravel road, the birds would likely fly up off the nest when only one or two pick-up trucks passed by. Similarly, a black bear unaccustomed to the sounds and scents of people may give a campground a wide berth during its travels, while a bear in the suburbs may routinely venture into backyards and partake of various food items being offered at bird feeders, oblivious to the residents gawking from back porches.

How much an animal or a group of animals will tolerate, therefore, depends on the context of the situation. This is why it can be very difficult for land managers to determine what distance is appropriate for the viewing public to maintain between themselves and wildlife. Following a code of viewing ethics can help the public alleviate unnecessary disturbances to wildlife and focus attention on the animals' needs instead of our own.

A Wildlife Watchers Code of Ethics

Many environmental organizations and state agencies have adopted a creed or guidelines that define appropriate wildlife watching. The American Birding Association follows a Code of Birding Ethics, and the U. S. National Partners in Watchable Wildlife have endorsed a Wildlife Watchers Code of Ethics. What these organizations have in common is a commitment to put the needs and safety of birds and other wildlife first. They pledge to respect wildlife, habitat, other wildlife viewers, and property.

Recognizing what constitutes appropriate wildlife watching behavior is basically common sense. Anything that might deliberately evoke a response should be done very sparingly and only by professionals, such as repeatedly using a tape recorder of certain bird calls in an area to reveal the locations of nesting birds, or going off a hiking trail to find a den or a nest you know to be in the area. Other examples of

It's smart to resist the temptation to interact with nature, especially young animals. There's a good chance that the parent of the young animal or bird is just out-of-sight waiting for you to leave.

poor outdoor etiquette include disturbing wildlife associated with a shoreline by making a huge wake with a motorboat, or leaving behind fishing line that could subsequently entangle a mammal or bird.

A responsible wildlife watcher follows these principles:

- Observe animals from a safe distance—use binoculars, spotting scopes and viewing blinds for a close view; avoid nests and dens; learn to recognize and respect wildlife alarm signals; move slowly and quietly.
- Allow wild animals to forage for their natural foods—reserve feeding of wildlife to backyard birds and avoid offering large quantities of food items like corn for deer and other animals, because this practice congregates wildlife and makes animals more susceptible to disease (animals on the move also present a greater hazard for motor vehicles and a nuisance to homeowners).
- Film and photograph wildlife responsibly—use a telephoto lens from a viewing blind or a vehicle; never chase, herd, flush or make deliberate noise that stresses wildlife.
- Leave nests, feathers, and other signs of wildlife in its place (not just for the benefit of wildlife but because collecting such items can be illegal).
- Always be considerate—ask permission to watch or photograph wildlife on private land, and observe all rules and regulations; leave pets at home or in the car; tread lightly, staying on trails and roads to minimize wildlife disturbance as well as other negative impacts like erosion.

Wildlife Watching in Virginia

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries sponsors a statewide Watchable Wildlife program which prints a code of ethics in all of its trail guides and other wildlife viewing publications. Part of the Department's mission is to provide opportunities for Virginians to enjoy wildlife, and workshops are frequently available. Citizens who value the importance of recording their wildlife observations are invited to explore the agency's WildlifeMapping program. WildlifeMapping provides training on how to be a good wildlife watcher and monitor species in the geographic area of your choice. For details on these programs, contact Jeff Trollinger, (804) 367-8747.

Did You Know...

A baby bird or mammal might appear to be an "orphan" when in reality its parent is watching close by or has only left to search for food and will return in a short while. If in doubt, move the baby bird to a nearby shrub and observe from a distance; the parent usually finds its young and proceeds to tend it as before. Contrary to popular opinion, a human scent will not cause a bird to abandon its young, as birds have a poor sense of smell.

Learning More...

Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail—this is a driving trail that links numerous wildlife watching areas in Virginia, such as parks, forests and private lands. Developed by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the coastal and mountain phases of the project are complete. The coastal phase contains all of eastern Virginia, from the Eastern Shore to Emporia, Richmond, and Manassas. The western phase includes the counties west of the Blue Ridge. A 100-page guide to the coastal portion is currently available with site descriptions, regional and loop maps, and directions. For a free hard-copy of the booklet (called "Discover Our Wild Side"), you must call the Virginia Department of Tourism at 1-866-VABIRDS. Electronically, you may view a list of places to visit by county or region at www.dgif.state.va.us (click on "wildlife" and then on "wildlife watching").

Wildlife Management Areas—the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries manages 34 areas around the state that provide access to a wide range of wildlife viewing opportunities. Although the areas are listed on the agency Web site under "where to hunt," WMAs are not just for hunters—they are public lands that are open to anyone who wants to visit. Hikers and birdwatchers equally enjoy the numerous amenities available, such as scenic drives, stands of wildflowers, walking trails, footbridges over streams, and observation platforms or overlooks. Visit www.dgif.state.va.us for descriptions and maps (click on "hunting" and then "where to hunt").

Watchable Wildlife, Inc. (www.watchablewildlife.org)—before you plan your next trip outside of Virginia, visit this Web site for access to wildlife viewing guides of 39 states (note: the Virginia guide is out-of-print, as of this writing). Watchable Wildlife also offers a publication called *Providing Positive Wildlife Viewing Experiences: a Practical Handbook*, which contains excellent guidelines suitable for anyone who leads nature walks or who manages visitors to parks, natural areas, and other public and private spaces. ☐

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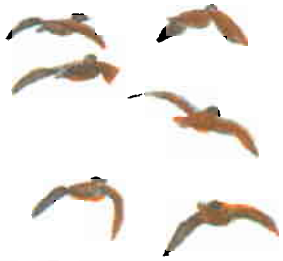
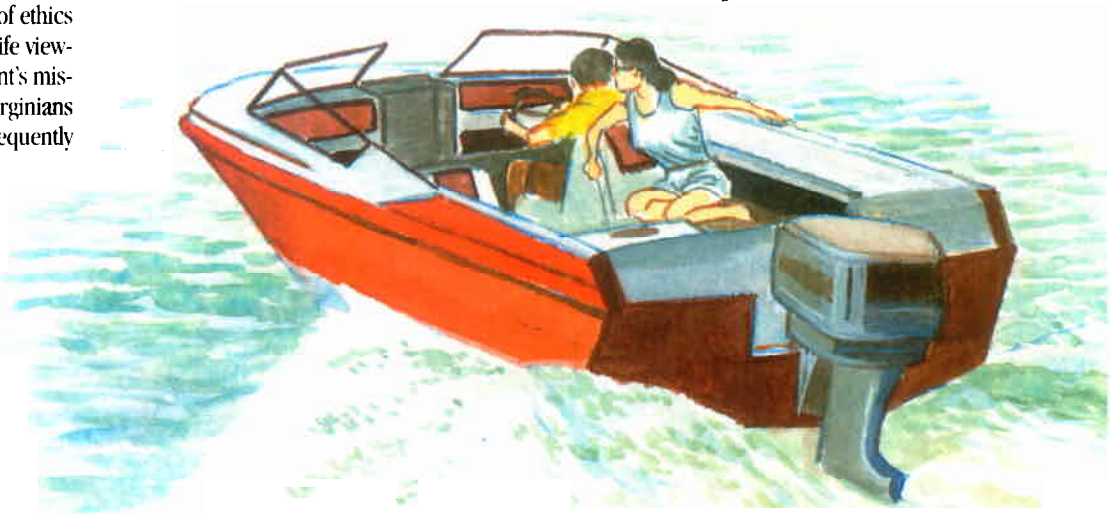
Having fun and enjoying time in the outdoors means that you should always be aware of the impact that you are making on nature and the environment.





Virginia Naturally