

Ethical Photography of our Beach-nesting Birds – Mark Lethlean

No doubt you've heard about the mounting threats to beach-nesting birds – vehicles on beaches, dogs off lead, horses training on soft sand, introduced predators, the increase in many adaptive natural predators and of course, climate change. But are photographers mounting a credible conservation effort on their behalf or actually becoming just another cog in the long list of credible threats?

The five species of Australian beach-nesting birds are, with good reason, extremely popular photographic subjects. They live in an environment that offers natural unencumbered light against the iconic background of sky, sea and sand. At breeding times they can be reliably found on territory. Their natural response to disturbance is not to be flushed from the area but to remain grounded and as disturbances increase on busy semi-urban beaches, their flight initiation distance (FID) has, by necessity, become quite low. They are relatively easy to photograph. It is therefore no surprise that Hooded Plovers, Red-capped Plovers and Oystercatchers, which can both blend and contrast within their environments, feature quite heavily on social media and photographic sites.



Nikon D800. 1/3200s, f/9, ISO 400. FL 460mm.

But what harm can photographers cause as we encroach into their territories and breeding grounds? In the field, while striving for photographic excellence, we must also be cognisant of our impact. We must tread lightly and cause no harm.

I have worked as a volunteer with the Beach-nesting Bird project of BirdLife Australia for about 7 years. It has been immensely rewarding to be involved in a citizen science project where I have personally developed from a simple bird watcher and photographer to being deeply involved in the conservation of a whole class of birds. I now consider myself to have some real level of expertise when discussing Hooded and Red-capped Plovers.

Initially my camera was an extremely valuable tool used in identifying engraved flags on banded birds. It was less about the photography. The flag data was critical for not only interpreting and

understanding the bird's faithfulness to partner and territory but to also record breeding strategies and population dynamics. We can now monitor and collect data on individuals rather than the general flock. After many years of training and mentoring I know how to find their cryptic nests, when they will hatch and how the parents behave to warn and protect their chicks. But I have always had real concerns about displaying any images taken of eggs, nests or chicks. Did it encourage other, less experienced photographers to follow suit?

The BirdLife Photography group, unlike many similar groups, has a strict code of ethics that must be adhered to if wanting to display images on their website. Images of nesting birds or birds that have been attracted by call playback are prohibited. However there are no restrictions on the images of the chicks of precocial species such as the Red-capped and Hooded Plovers. These are bird species that are well developed at hatching and leave the nest almost immediately. The problem is that brilliant images by field specialists may promote other less experienced photographers to push the boundaries. From the images I see on social media – they undoubtedly do.

Since we invoke the '*precautionary principle*' for a code of ethics for nesting birds we must also consider the same principle for images of these high risk chicks.



Nikon D800. 1/2000s, f/7.1, ISO 400. FL 600mm.

So how do you safely photograph beach-nesting birds?

For starters, know their breeding seasons and try to avoid times when nests and/or chicks may be present. In the off season, many will flock into larger groups, which makes photography a breeze.

Visit the birds with a trained observer and initially focus less on the image and more on the birds and their behaviours.

You should never be targeting nests or chicks. In response to disturbance, adult birds rely on the nest's natural camouflage as protection. With repeated disturbance and especially in extremes of weather the prolonged exposure of the eggs can have a detrimental effects on the development

and survival of the embryo. If chicks are disturbed they seek shelter and so their critical feeding time is reduced.

Read the beach signage and respect management fences but always remember that they are only a guide and that adults, nests and chicks maybe anywhere.

Don't visit these beaches on hot or windy days, or when there is a high tide or large swell.

Be watchful for adaptive predators. Disturbance of adults can leave eggs and chicks vulnerable to attack by gulls, corvids or raptors.

Watch the behavior of adults. Are adults leading you along the beach, enticing you to follow away from nest or chicks? Are they calling - voicing instructions to a partner or chicks? Are they performing distraction or broken-wing displays? If so, cautiously follow the bird, as you are at real risk of crushing a nest or chick.



Nikon D810. 1/1600s, f/6.3, ISO 800. FL 600mm.

There is no doubt that we need quality images of our beach-nesting birds for the production of signs, promotional articles and general educational programs. However, there are strict rules and protocols that must be followed by people with experience to achieve these so please, I repeat, tread lightly and cause no harm.

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[Editor's Note: A similar, but more technical, version of this article appears in *The Photo Lab* column of the latest (December 2018) issue of the *Australian Birdlife* magazine.]