

Towards A Code of Conduct for Bird Photographers: A Thank You to Birdlife Photography Members – Graeme Cam (BLP), Caitlin Slater (Deakin University) and Mike Weston (Deakin University).

BirdLife Photography played a pivotal role in a recent study, accepted for publication in the journal *Biological Conservation*, looking at developing a science-based code of practice for bird photography. The project was conducted by Deakin University honours student, Caitlin Slater, now working in Japan and continuing her bird studies while she is teaching English. Birdlife Photography members responded positively and constructively to a survey of photographer behaviour, motivation and attitudes to bird photography, which enabled the first analysis which described these attributes among bird photographers. The study also conducted standardised approaches to birds in Australia and China and measured their response to different experiments (“approaches”) which mimicked some stereotyped photographer behaviour.

Key findings of the study were:

- Photographers are similar to hunters, in that they try to approach a bird closely and use a variety of tactics to achieve that. Of course, photographers don’t try to kill birds, but birds may perceive them as acting like hunters and may respond to them as such.
- Photographers took and shared images partly to inspire others. The survey outlined a good deal of education, inspiration and awareness that flows from bird photography. Birds are lucky to benefit from this attention, and photographers cared about bird conservation. While bird photography may disturb birds, most photographers felt disturbance they caused was trivial in comparison to that which birds experience from other sources.
- We quantified avian escape responses evoked by photographers by measuring the distances at which they responded. We did this in relation to: 1) a walker, 2) a “walking” approach by a photographer, taking photographs regularly as she/he approached, 3) a photographer with a flash, and 4) a crouched photographer approach where the investigator crouched as they approached birds. Across species, we found differences between these approach types in terms of bird response, with exact patterns varying between species.
- For most species, photographers evoked escape at longer distances than walkers. This was interesting because birds could differentiate the behaviour of photographers from that of a walker, and responded in a manner which suggests they perceived photographers as more risky than walkers. It also seems some of the photographer tactics don’t actually result in closer proximities to birds.

Clearly, this is the first small step in what could be a much broader and deeper program of research into bird photography and the ethics associated with the pastime. We want to thank members for their enthusiastic support of this project. Embracing a science-based code of practice seems like a terrific way to enjoy a wonderful pursuit (bird photography) and be part of a group which is a world leader in ethical photography.

This work was conducted under Deakin University ethics animal approval (B11-2015 and B10-2018), DEWLP permit (10008731), and human ethics approval (STEC-13-2018-SLATER).

[Editor’s Note: See also “**Camera Shy**”, a document which presents a graphical summary of the survey results and the study of bird responses to photographers. If you would like a PDF version of the full paper published in *Biological Conservation*, please email mweston@deakin.edu.au]