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## **Overeager Photographers Harm Birds' Health**

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October 28, 2021

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Jo Detz



Photographers getting too close to birds, especially owls, when taking pictures is a growing problem in Rhode Island. (istock)

**By TODD McLEISH/ecoRI News contributor**

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The increasing popularity of bird photography and the desire of photographers to showcase their images on social media is raising concerns that birds are being harassed and disturbed, leading to potentially harmful effects on their health.

Bird conservation organizations around the globe, from the National Audubon Society to Britain's Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds, are asking bird photographers to avoid getting too close and reminding the photographers of the codes of ethics that many wildlife photography organizations have established.

Local wildlife advocates have noted that it's also an increasing problem in Rhode Island.

“It’s definitely a problem here, and it’s getting worse,” said one longtime birder who wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. “There are more photographers, and there are more forums that photographers can post their photos on. It’s an ego trip for them. They want to post their photos and get likes, and that leads them to harass the birds.”

Laura Carberry, refuge manager at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island’s Fisherville Brook Wildlife Refuge, and Rachel Farrell, a member of the Rhode Island Avian Records Committee, said getting too close to wild birds can pose serious dangers to them. Birds see people as predators, and when people approach, the birds must stop feeding and instead exert extra energy they may not have to escape the area. They also may be forced to leave their nests unattended, making their eggs and chicks vulnerable to predation, thermal stress, or trampling.

When a rare European bird was discovered at Snake Den State Park in Johnston last year and birders and photographers flocked to the site to observe the visitor, some photographers chased the bird across a farmer’s fields to get better photographs. Birders say that is a common occurrence whenever rarities are discovered.

Owls are particularly sensitive to disturbance, Farrell said, and the managers of Swan Point Cemetery in Providence have resorted to putting yellow caution tape from tree to tree around an area where great horned owls have nested in recent years to keep photographers from going too close.

“I remember seeing a photographer banging a stick against the bottom of a tree to get an owl to come out of its hole,” Farrell said.

Other birders recalled when a photographer played a recording of a screech owl for so long that one of the nestlings almost fell out of the nest because it was so distressed by the recording.

According to Carberry, Audubon has occasionally had to close parts of its refuges when owl nests have been discovered because photographers go off trail and disturb habitats to approach the nest. The organization has asked birders not to report where owls are nesting until after the breeding season to reduce the problem.

“We often tell people that if the bird is looking at you, you’re too close,” she said.

It’s not just a problem with photographers, however. Some birdwatchers are also at fault for similar behaviors. Some will play audio recordings of bird songs to attract the birds out into the open, for example, a practice condemned by ornithologist Charles Clarkson, the director of avian research at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island.

“The daily energetic demands of birds are extremely high, even when they are not actively nesting,” he said. “Distracting birds from essential tasks — foraging, preening, defending territory — can leave them in an energy deficit, which is difficult to make up,”

he said. “To lure birds in using taped calls can have serious negative consequences for individual birds and even local bird populations where taped calls are used regularly. It’s best to leave birds be and use your own power of observation to find as many as possible.”

How to resolve the problem is unclear. Enforcing codes of ethics is difficult, and speaking up sometimes results in abusive responses. The Atlantic Flyway Shorebird Initiative is surveying birders and bird photographers to assess the scale of the problem and to see if educational messaging and communication tools could be developed to address the issue.

“I think folks lose sight of what they may be doing to the species they are trying to get a glimpse of or take a photo of,” Carberry said. “They should always think of the bird first and think if they are impacting it in any way. I think that if they put the birds’ needs first, they would be more careful about approaching a nest or getting a little too close.”

*Rhode Island resident and author Todd McLeish runs a wildlife blog.*

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