

Disturbance to Sea and Inland Birds Factsheet

for Guides, Leaders and Coaches

What is meant by disturbance to birds?

Disturbance to birds is defined as any human activity inducing unusual behaviour. Any deviations from undisturbed behaviour, but particularly escape responses from the disturbed site, are bound to result in extra energy expenditure often resulting in detrimental impacts.

Bird Species

These can be divided into seabirds and inland birds

Seabirds

Millions of seabirds and shorebirds breed and feed overwinter or pass through on migration around our coastline. Paddling provides a great opportunity to observe this fantastic diversity all year round. Some common species you may encounter include Gulls, Terns, Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Cormorants.

During the breeding season (roughly from February to August, depending on the species), birds nest in burrows and crevices, on cliff tops and cliff faces or on shingle beaches at the shoreline. In many places, these birds come together to form spectacular colonies, with amazing sights, sounds and smells, as well as using the waters around their colonies for feeding, resting and socialising.

During the non-breeding season (generally from August to May, but again can vary), large concentrations of waterbirds use our inland waters, and estuaries to feed and settle over winter. These birds are especially prone to disturbance at these times. For this reason some waters conservation organisations are concerned with disturbance from certain water sport recreation. British Canoeing will always work with other organisations to ensure a balance between recreation and conservation is achieved.

Inland birds

Great Britain is blessed with a diverse number of inland bird species from inland lakes and rivers and canals.



What does this mean for coaches?

Coaches need to be aware that ALL wild bird species, their eggs and nests are protected by law. You must always try to avoid harming birds or to use measures which do not kill or injure them.

Because of this protection by law, you should always consider your actions and how they might disturb the birds nesting there. For example, things like noise, or trimming or cutting trees, bushes, hedges and rough vegetation at the wrong time of year can cause harm. Getting too close can also be harmful.

Guidance to avoid the potential disturbance of ALL birds

Please consider the following for you and your clients:

Stay at a safe distance from cliffs with nesting seabirds during the breeding season, ideally at least 50 metres from the cliff. Paddle past quietly and steadily so as not to panic the birds and allow seabirds to resetttle quickly. At all times watch the birds' reaction and respect them by acting accordingly. This includes agitation (head bobbing) and increased vocalisation. Also avoid gathering in large groups.

Be vigilant for nests on the ground and move out of any breeding area as soon as you realise you are in or close to it. Walking over a burrow can crush the nest, or cause the adult to desert its young, so be aware of their presence.

Remember, reckless destruction of active burrows is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Avoid panicking seabirds on the water into flight. These birds are likely to be feeding or resting, so disturbance is likely to cause them to use up extra energy or reduce their feeding time. Note that some of the Auk family incubate eggs with their feet and sudden disturbance can cause the egg to fall off the cliff edge. Keep a low paddle angle where possible.

In late summer many seabirds and ducks moult and are at their weakest and most vulnerable. Some species such as guillemots and razorbills are often with their flightless young in the waters around breeding colonies at this time too.

Avoid high tide roosts of shore birds and feeding concentrations of water birds on estuaries.

Report any incidents of disturbance you see to your regional RSPB office.

This protection has led to the development and implementation of Marine Conservation Zones, which include Voluntary Exclusion Zones e.g. Pembrokeshire Marine Code.

There are a number of different protected areas, both international and national including Special Protection Areas and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The disturbance of wildlife is a criminal offence, furthermore all species of bird are protected from killing or disturbance while nesting.

Additional guidance for INLAND BIRDS

Like seabirds, the 'Bird Nesting Season' is officially from February until August and it is recommended that vegetation works (tree or hedge cutting) or site clearance should be done outside of the nesting season. However, in reality the nesting period may start before this and extend beyond it.

Some birds, known as 'schedule 1 birds', e.g. barn owls, have extra legal protection. For these bird species it's also an offence to do the following:

- Either intentionally or by not taking enough care: disturb them while they're nesting, building a nest, in or near a nest that contains their young

Flushing (birds leaving their nesting or roosting sites) is the most common result of disturbance which can have a big impact:

- Birds abandon their nests, making chicks vulnerable to predation
- Increased predation of eggs and chicks while the adult bird is away and not protecting the nest
- Eggs are not being incubated and so could delay hatching