

# BirdWalk Newsletter 4.24.2016

Walks Conducted by  
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Written by Jayne Matney

Due to a spring bird count this weekend, Perry was unable to be at the plantation for a walk. So, I hope you enjoy reading an article I have been working on for this very unusual occasion.



Blue-winged Teal family

Photo by Jo Frkovich

## The Ethics of Birdwatching and Nature Photography

I must tell you, right at the beginning, I have been around nature lovers and environmental enthusiasts all my life. The dear, the quirky, the enlightened! My earliest memories came from my father that used to go flounder gigging all night and come home at dawn when I was a little girl. I would be fascinated by the fish he would bring in. Family trips were always an adventure and usually in the NC mountains. I was lucky enough to have some teachers that encouraged me to study biology. I did, and ended up surrounding myself with people that worked in the field with me and friends that enjoyed being out in kayaks or hiking. Amateur and professional naturalists alike get their delight from seeing the special spirit of nature. I love that!

Presently, I have found myself working in beautiful Magnolia Plantation and Gardens. In this magnificent place of nature and history, and I am constantly reminded about how dedicated to the preservation of these two things we are here at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens. In this day and age, the balance of human cohabitation with the natural world has been stretched tremendously over the years. Our curiosity along with our desire to master and achieve sometimes gets us in grey areas of behavior and some would also say “way beyond the grey!” Sometimes, common sense seems to fly out the window. I’ll give you some extreme examples that I have witnessed myself. For example, when I worked as a zookeeper in my 20’s, a father was caught holding his child over the viewing fence so that she could see the bear! Or what about the time here at Magnolia a parent was asking his little girl to sit on the edge of the pond next to the baby alligator and lean in toward it so he could get a selfie for her. Not the best portraits of a careful parent. And sometimes human behavior is a product of lack of discipline or empathy- maybe down right meanness! Again, at the zoo, we (the employees) always stationed ourselves close to the alligator habitat when

big groups came in to the park. Otherwise, adults and children would throw sticks and rocks at alligators that already were blinded and could no longer live well in the wild. The replies when confronted were usually something like, “Well, I just wanted to see them move!” We also had a young man “offer” our barn cat as sacrifice for entertainment purposes to our Puma and visitors by tossing her into the Puma habitat to see what would happen. Now, most of us see these examples as extreme situations, but you get the idea. Most people do not have this level of irresponsibility, poor judgement, or lack of respect. And luckily, most situations are not extreme and can be quite slight, but if done by many (humans), or of poor or misinformed behavior, this can be a disruption to individuals in a natural habitat or to the whole of an environment.

What does this have to do with birdwatching? Well, in our country, The American Birding Association publishes their “Principles of Birding Ethics” that can be used by any birding group as a reference to educate members in acceptable behaviors and discuss the issues. The code divides the issues into 4 separate areas:

1. Promote the welfare of birds and their environment
2. Respect the law, and the rights of others
3. Ensure that feeders, nest structures, and other artificial bird environments are safe.
4. Group Birding, whether organized or impromptu, requires special care.



Great Blue Heron in flight by Jo Frkovich

Each of these Codes for Birding Ethics goes into more detail on each topic for protection of the birds and environment along with proper etiquette for the humans interested in birding, nature watching, or photography (<http://www.aba.org>). Some of our nation’s birding and photography clubs are very responsible and teach the ethics of nature watching.

Have you ever thought about how bird watchers or nature photographers could step over their boundaries and be offensive to others or may cause unnecessary stresses on the environment or the animal which they love yet pursue sometimes relentlessly? For example, I hear many stories about members or employees observing photographers that are also bird watchers leaning way over the railings of our boardwalks in the Audubon Swamp with their cameras right in the face of a mother Prothonotary Warbler with her eggs as she is sitting the nest. This causes undo stress and these eggs may be abandoned for too long a period of time or forever. This action could change the bird’s natural behavior. She may not come back to this area to nest. Granted, most of the time these birders or photographers mean well. The intent is not to harm or disrupt, but they get so focused and thrilled at what they are witnessing that they want to get the best view or position possible.

Let's face it, social media has also influenced this fervor. A friend of mine, Jim Crotty, has been a professional photographer for many years and he is also an award winner who also happens to be an educator as adjunct instructor at Sinclair Community College. He told me:

**“The allure of capturing that one image that garners the most “likes,” lead to that book cover and result in that 1st place award at the camera club can be intoxicating, can't it? It always has been but what has truly amped-up the enticement of this kind of competitive notoriety is the explosive growth and impact of online social media. It's caused nearly all photographers to drift into the realm of the quick fix of online fame. It's worth mentioning here because I think it does have a great deal to do with the importance of ethical conduct in this particular artistic medium. It's served as “added fuel,” so to say, to forces at work that can push good, decent people over that borderline and away from what is right toward not-so-good behavior.”**

As a nature photographer, he has seen many incidences of poor behavior toward the environment, the animal subjects, and each other. He gave me some examples saying,

**“The situations that come to mind most often pertain to wildlife subjects but I've observed it in landscape photography as well. I've seen Black Bear cubs harassed up trees in Great Smoky Mountain National Park and raptors baited with store-bought mice. I've seen photographers put themselves and others in danger by stopping along roadsides with traffic flying by, (and) gardens have been trampled over. I've also seen bird nesting sites destroyed and alligators approached with nothing more than camera phones. In general, just a lot that leaves me walking away and shaking my head.”**



They see only their speck of influence on the bird or the environment without thinking about the consequences of their actions especially if it were done by many. Take, for example, the case of “The Rare Northern Hawk Owl”. Becca Cudmore wrote, “A rare bird alert is usually a fortunate event: But not for a Northern Hawk Owl that turned up dead in rural Washington earlier this month” in “A Rare Owl Turned Up Dead- Are Birders To Blame?” on the Audubon website.( <http://audubon.org/news> ). It seems that once birders found out that this rare bird was seen in the area, the area became packed with those wanting to see it. Cars, cameras, scopes, tripods, news trucks, interviews, binoculars burst into the scene. Not only was this obtrusive to the bird, but the neighbor that lived there was having his entire life disrupted, invaded, destroyed. He had no privacy. After a week of this invasion, he posted a sign that read “No Photos Allowed” on his property hoping to get some peace and live his life without binoculars and cameras facing his way. Later that evening, the rare owl was photographed dead from gunshot wounds and displayed by hanging in the tree. At the time of the article, an investigation was underway. We may be too quick to judge in this case. Was it THAT neighbor? Was it a

different neighbor? Is the shooter the only one to blame here? Are the birders and photographers' behavior and lack of respect for the area partly to blame? Could this have been avoided by the local authorities? Could this be better managed by the birding and photography enthusiasts? What is the solution?

According to the New York City Audubon Society, <http://nycaudubon.org/ethics> , in places that are high traffic areas like Central Park in New York City, visitors are encourage with signage to stay along the trails and to not use recordings to attract particular bird species to the viewers. (Using recordings is, by itself, an entirely different topic of discussion) The Migratory Bird Treaty covers protecting the birds, nests, eggs, and feathers unless you have a scientific permit to do so. Also covered would be such behavior that could be considered harassing of the birds, and “rescuing” a young that is suspected of being abandoned is prohibited.



Different countries have their own guidelines to provide for the protection of birds and to inform visitors of the bird habitats on best practices to use there. Australia, for example, has “Ethical Birding Guidelines” published by Birdlife Australia which has all of the usual guidelines for birders and photographers just as The Thai Bird Spot publishes “Birding Ethics” which provides information in the regulations for their country which includes the same principles as Australia. Yet each country is so different in their existing ecosystems, some regulations must also be made more specific for the country.

Photos by Jo Frkovich

Also, different countries compare in their attitude towards birds. On the website, <http://www.hungarianbirdwatching.com>, it is very clear how Hungarians feel about birds and birdwatching with the statements, “wandering in the nature and observing the world’s nicest creatures, the birds” and “remember that the welfare of the bird must always come first”. Sometimes, there are so many things going on by human activity that we don’t even know which of these activities is the cause of population changes over the years. Human activity can change behavior or population decline- human activity with disruptive noise, litter and chemical pollution, as well as destroying habitat. When photographing or simply enjoying the outdoors, Jim Crotty advises, “Be a brief visitor and not an intruder.” When it comes to our birders and photographers here at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, they strive for best practices in what they do, and because of that, our habitats and subjects are respected.

