

# IAATO Operational Procedures for Wildlife Watching

The SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Working Group has advised that there is a high risk that Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) will arrive in Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions during the 2023/24 – 2024/25 austral summers. Globally, the virus has caused mass mortality events in wild birds and seals. People working with or close to wildlife should assume HPAI will arrive and maintain the highest biosecurity possible. Report any unusual or high mortality events to IAATO following appropriate procedures via your expedition team.

These IAATO procedures for wildlife watching highlight the overarching requirements for safe, environmentally responsible wildlife watching. When combined with IAATO operational procedures for watching specific species, conducting activities and site-specific guidelines, plus other national and international requirements<sup>1</sup>, they aim to reduce negative impacts of human activities on wildlife. **Always follow the requirements of your permit or authorization, which may be more stringent than IAATO's.**

## Managing activities around wildlife

Never use any means of transport, including, vessels, small boats<sup>2</sup>, vehicles or aircraft, in ways that disturb wildlife:

- Approach and depart from landing sites, colonies and individual animals slowly and carefully.
- Coordinate with others in the area who are watching wildlife.-
- Keep noise to a minimum.
- Do not make sudden movements
- Be aware of areas where animals exit or enter water or colonies. Do not block these areas with people, small boats or equipment.

Always maintain an appropriate distance from wildlife to avoid signs of disturbance. Prescribed distances of approach/observation must be followed. While in many cases a greater distance may be required, keep at least 5m/15 feet from wildlife on land and/or ice. Any closer interactions should be dictated by the animals.

Abide by any guidance on distances in species-, site- and activity-specific guidelines.

Some species or behaviours require a greater distance to be kept. e.g. breeding stage or molt.



<sup>1</sup> This document does not replace any IAATO wildlife watching guidelines or domestic government laws. Violation of national regulations may be punishable by fines, imprisonment and, in extreme cases, seizure of assets. IAATO operators must be aware that compliance with IAATO guidelines might be insufficient to prevent penalties resulting from national laws and regulations

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this document, 'small boats' are defined as Zodiac-style Inflatable boats, such as rigid or semi-rigid hull Inflatable boats or any similar small landing craft used for shore interaction.

Animals may alter their behaviour if disturbed. Monitor animal behaviour throughout any encounter. When in doubt, slowly increase your distance.

- Never use selfie sticks or similar equipment to get closer.
- Do not use flash photography in any circumstance.
- Keep equipment as far from animals as is practicable. Never leave it unattended
- Always give wildlife the right-of-way.

Never encourage interactions, touch wildlife or let it touch you. This can cause stress or injury, increase risk of disease transmission and/or lead to an aggressive response from the animal.

#### **Never feed wildlife.**

When ashore in snow and ice, avoid making 'postholes' which can trap penguins. Try to maintain the same track through the snow. If holes are made, carefully fill them in or make them wider and/or sloped so that wildlife can easily step out of them.



## **Activities not accepted by IAATO**

IAATO does not allow the recreational use of Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) in coastal areas by its members.

Due to the intrinsic nature of wildlife being present in all waters surrounding Antarctica, jet- skis, any type of surf, kite, skim or wind board are not to be used.

## **Biosecurity**

Prevention is the most effective way to avoid introducing or spreading non-native species and disease. The process begins before departing for Antarctica. Adhere to mandatory biosecurity procedures and any international or national requirements, including those of the Antarctic Treaty System. Biosecurity procedures apply to all equipment and people and must be followed between distinct regions in Antarctica and between Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic.

## **Aircraft and helicopter operations**

Aircraft, including helicopters, should follow the guidelines laid out in Antarctic Treaty Resolution 2 (2004) 'Guidelines for the Operation of Aircraft near Concentrations of Birds in Antarctica.'



## Entanglement and strandings

In Antarctica, any animals entangled in fishing equipment etc., should only be assisted **if safe to do so**. Given the high risk of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza arriving in Antarctica and sub-Antarctic regions, staff/crew are advised not to assist entangled seals or birds during the 2023/24 and 2024/25 seasons.

Photographs of the entanglement should be taken if possible.

Please record details including geographic position (expressed as coordinates in latitude and longitude), species, and type of entanglement.

Details of dead (floating) animals and 'strandings' (beached) cetaceans should be recorded and reported. Only if safe to do so, please take photographs recording the front and side of the head of the animal (for species identification). If possible, include a scale of measurement (e.g., a ruler or small boat paddle) in the photographs. If the state of decomposition of the animal allows, please also take photographs of the fluke (tail) and the dorsal fin (if present) to allow recognition of potentially known individuals (i.e. using photoidentification).



## Reporting, data collection and monitoring

Supporting data collection and monitoring can help inform management and policy to protect the environment.

Whale strikes, seabird strikes and entanglements (above) should be reported via expedition teams to IAATO following appropriate procedures.<sup>3</sup>

Report other unusual incidents involving wildlife via expedition teams to IAATO following appropriate procedures.

If you come across an operation or visitor not following Antarctic Treaty System guidance, please follow appropriate procedures for reporting the event and inform IAATO. Take photographs if possible.

<sup>3</sup> 'Appropriate procedures' may vary depending on the area of operation or National Authority requirements. Additionally, IAATO Operators are required to follow appropriate internal reporting procedures detailed in IAATO's Field Operations Manual.