

IAATO Operational Procedures for Viewing Birds¹

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.

General code of conduct for viewing birds on land, ice or water

- Do not use vessels, small boats² or other means of transport in ways that disturb wildlife, whether on land, ice, at sea or in the air.
- 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
- Animals may alter their behaviour if disturbed. If there is an observed change in the bird's behaviour then move slowly away.
- Always give animals the right of way.
- Never encourage interactions, touch wildlife or let them touch you. This can cause stress or injury, increase risk of disease transmission and lead to an aggressive response from the animal.
- Inquisitive individuals, especially penguins, may approach people. Try to maintain the minimum required distance (at least 5m) when safe to do so, and be prepared to back away slowly. Look behind yourself before you move. Do not put yourself in the path of mobile penguins.
- Always follow appropriate biosecurity procedures for clothing, footwear and equipment.
- Never feed wildlife.



Viewing and approaching birds on shore

On approach of boats to shore, birds such as penguins may be subject to disturbance by small boat operations close to landing sites or colonies.

- Approach or depart a landing site or colony slowly to minimize any disturbance. Keep noise to a minimum.
- Staff/crew should assess the best landing point – ideally as far from groups of birds as possible. This is particularly important if birds are moulting near the shore.
- Avoid boat operations in waters where birds enter and exit, are bathing, or are feeding close to colonies.
- Be aware of birds in the water; slow down and/or alter course to avoid collision. Coordinate with others in the area who are watching wildlife.
- When viewing birds on cliffs or on land from small boats, approach, cruise and depart the area slowly.

¹ Be aware that IAATO wildlife watching and other Operational Procedures do not replace any domestic governmental laws. Some nations have guidelines or regulations stricter than IAATO's which may override IAATO procedures. Violation of national regulations may be punishable by fines, imprisonment and, in extreme cases, seizure of vessel.

² 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.

Recommended approach distances for viewing birds on shore

- **Minimum distance from birds is at least 5 meters/15 feet³.**
- This is assuming animals are showing no signs of disturbance from your presence.
- Recommended approach distances for species and/or life stages are summarized in Table 1. Every situation is different and may require greater distances to be kept.
- Never disturb wildlife or plants to get better pictures. Don't use flash photography in any circumstance.
- Maintain the recommended distances between you and the animals.
- Don't use 'selfie sticks' or other equipment to get closer.

Table 1 – Recommended approach distances to wildlife

Species and/or life stage	Minimum Distance (m/ft)	Be aware:
Nesting seabirds	5m/15 feet	This is the minimum distance unless otherwise advised. Applies also to small boats cruising islands and cliffs.
Nesting Southern Giant petrels	25m/75ft	Particularly sensitive to disturbance while nesting.
Nesting albatrosses	10m/30 ft	
Displaying albatrosses	25m/75ft	
Penguins in molt (individuals and groups)	5m/15 ft	Penguins take around 4 weeks to molt which is when they replace old feathers with new ones. They cannot go to sea to feed during this time so extra care is required to avoid causing stress.

Once on shore

- Walk slowly and carefully, encouraging visitors to pause and watch the animals. Keep noise to a minimum. Do not make sudden movements.
- Avoid blocking penguin paths and water entry and exit points. Coordinate with others in the area who are watching 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.
- Always give animals the right of way. If parent birds are blocked from returning to their nests, increased predation of eggs and chicks by skuas and gulls may occur. In addition, parent birds will waste precious energy by avoiding human obstacles on the way to their nests or being displaced from the shortest access route.
- Stay outside the margins of colonies and observe from a safe distance. Adhere to recommended approach distances. If there is an observed change in the bird's behaviour, move slowly away.
- Take care in tussock grass where birds may be nesting. Seabird burrow habitat can be very fragile and should not be walked on.
- If skuas or terns start dive-bombing, they may be protecting young or nests. Gulls are also prone to disturbance. Retreat in the direction you approached by retracing your steps. Be aware that eggs and young are well camouflaged and might be hidden very difficult to see.



³ General Guidelines for Visitors to the Antarctic, Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting Resolution 4 (2021), Annex 1

Viewing birds on water

- Keep vessel noise and activities from impacting wildlife, even when a vessel is transiting.
- For vessels operating in areas of birds or other wildlife, careful consideration should be given before using outside public announcement systems
- Under no circumstances should 'chumming' (use fish or fish oil) be done to attract birds.



Concentrations of birds on water

Sometimes concentrations of seabirds may be found at sea e.g. rafts of birds either feeding on the surface, diving, or simply resting and bathing.

- Many of these birds may have travelled thousands of miles, often to find food for their young.
- Stay on the fringes of these concentrations and avoid disturbance.
- Ships and yachts should stay at least 100 meters/ 300 feet away.
- Small boats and human powered watercraft should stay at least 30 meters/90 feet away.

Birds on floating ice

Birds often use floating ice to rest on or to avoid predators.

- Ships and yachts should aim to stay at least 100 meters/300 feet from concentrations of birds on floating ice.
- Small boats and human powered watercraft should stay at least 5–15m away from birds on ice. This is assuming animals show no signs of disturbance from your presence, such as rapid changes in behaviour or flipper-flapping in penguins. Move away slowly, aiming to avoid sudden changes in behaviour.

Penguins landing in small boats

Occasionally, penguins end up landing in small boats, and can become 'trapped'.

- Occupants should remain quiet and wait for the penguin to find its own way over the side and return to the water. It is normally not necessary to assist. However, in a case where assistance is required, one person could move quietly and slowly to create a ramp using a paddle blade or backpacks for the bird to use to hop up onto the pontoon. If there are passengers in the small boat, move them as far away from the penguin as is safely possible in order to reduce stress to the animal.