

Standard Operating Procedure

SC26-08 WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY: ETHICAL PROCEDURES FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS AND THOSE WORKING WITH WILDLIFE (AUGUST 2026)

Animal welfare is the responsibility of all personnel involved in the care and use of animals for scientific purposes.

Personnel involved in an Animal Ethics Committee approved project should read and understand their obligations under the *Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes*.

Version 1.3

August 2026



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Conservation and Attractions**

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August 2026

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The recommended reference for this publication is:
Department Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, 2026, *Standard Operating Procedure SC26-08: Wildlife Photography: Ethical procedures for photographers and those working with wildlife* (August 2026). Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, Perth.

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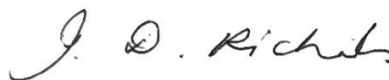
Revision History Log

Version	Date	Details	Author/Reviewer	Approved By	Approval
1.0	2021	Document created	Amy Robey	Principal Zoologist	July 2021
1.1	2023	Reformatting	Amie Raycraft	M. Dziminski	June 2023
1.2	8/10/2025	Revision of content	M. Sheehan, A. Raycraft, J. Richards & M. Pillay	J. Richards	February 2026
1.3	23/06/2026	Renaming and addition of methods for personnel working with wildlife	J. Richards, K. Rayner, C. Sims, S. Cowen, S. Garretson	J. Richards	August 2026

*Previously titled *Ethical Wildlife Photography*

Approvals: Version 1.3

Approved by the DBCA Animal Ethics Committee:


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Chairperson, Animal Ethics Committee

Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions

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1 Acknowledgements

This standard operating procedure was originally developed by the Species and Communities Program, with contributions from Allan Burbidge, Mark Blythman, Matthew Swan, Vicki Stokes, Plaxy Barrat, Rob McLean, Roy McFaull and Doug Gimesy. Recent updates include content from DBCA Animal Science Program's *Guideline for ethical behaviour during animal photography and videography*, with contributions from Kelly Rayner, Sean Garretson, Colleen Sims and Saul Cowen.

2 Purpose

This document provides standards and guidelines for wildlife photographers, both professional and amateur, to operate in a manner that avoids disturbance of wildlife and damage to their habitat or minimises impacts on animal welfare when photographing wild animals, including during their capture, handling and release. When done correctly, wildlife photography can be a useful tool for species and individual identification, often reducing or removing the need to interact directly, and to raise awareness of species and ecological communities in need of conservation.

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) provides advice on limiting the potential negative impacts that wildlife photography may have upon wild fauna.

3 Scope

This SOP has been developed to provide guidance to both professional and amateur wildlife photographers operating in Western Australia and is endorsed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions' (DBCA) Animal Ethics Committee (AEC). 'Wildlife photographers' (herein 'Photographers') are defined as those who document wild fauna using either photography or videography practices and includes both remote and person-operated devices.

This SOP complements the *Australian code of practice for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes* (The Code). The Code contains an introduction to the ethical use of animals in wildlife studies and should be referred to for all AEC approved projects. A copy of The Code may be viewed by visiting the National Health and Medical Research Council website (<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-code-care-and-use-animals-scientific-purposes>).

4 Legislation

Photographers should be aware of the appropriate sections of the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (BC Act) and *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* (CALM Act) as well as the respective Regulations and any subsequent amendments.

Under section 149 of the BC Act, it is an offence to take fauna without lawful authority to do so. Fauna that has been captured by any means and could apply in circumstances where fauna has been "staged", is considered 'take' under the Act.

Under Section 153 of the BC Act, it is an offence to disturb fauna without a lawful authority to do so. A person is disturbing fauna if they engage in an activity that has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of altering the natural behaviour of fauna to its detriment – these effects can be either short-term or long-term. Higher penalties apply to the unlawful disturbance of threatened and specially protected species and different approvals are required.

Under section 155 of the BC Act, it is an offence to feed fauna. Feeding fauna for the purposes of photography is prohibited.

If a photographer determines that their activities are likely to take or disturb fauna, they must contact DBCA Wildlife Licensing via wildlifelicensing@dbca.wa.gov.au or (08) 9219 9831 to apply for an appropriate licence, unless already authorised as a component of approved programs that include fauna capture, handling and release.

Taking still or motion pictures on land managed by DBCA for commercial purposes is prohibited without lawful authority under Section 108 of the Conservation and Land Management Regulations 2002. If a person plans to undertake photography or videography on DBCA managed land for commercial purposes they must complete and submit a commercial filming and/or photography application at least six weeks prior to the intended film dates.

Persons wanting to use remote sensor cameras or “camera traps” on DBCA managed land are required to obtain authority to do so and should contact DBCA Wildlife Licensing. The use of these types of devices is also regulated by the *Surveillance Devices Act 1998* and Surveillance Device Regulations 1999.

Those using drones or remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) must additionally comply with all legislative and regulatory requirements of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority. There are separation distances for marine mammals that must be observed under the Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2018. If a flight is planned for areas managed under the CALM Act, DBCA requests that operators contact the relevant district/region office prior to the activity to ensure there is no impact upon park management operations.

5 Document structure and terminology

This document uses the following terminology:

Standards

These are the minimum standards to ensure fauna is not disturbed. They are clearly identified in the text under the heading ‘Standards’ and the use of the word ‘must’. If a photographer is going to undertake activities that are likely to cause disturbance, you may need to apply for an appropriate licence from DBCA, if not already licenced. Contact the department’s Wildlife Licensing Section via wildlifelicensing@dbca.wa.gov.au or (08) 9219 9831 for further guidance.

Guidelines

Guidelines describe agreed ethical best practice based on scientific information, accumulated experience and consultation. Guidelines are identified in the text by the heading ‘Guidelines’ and the use of the word ‘should’.

6 Principles

6.1 Foster wildlife conservation and animal welfare

6.1.1 Respect wildlife from a distance

Standard

Photographers must not photograph wildlife if doing so may expose it to threats, stress, physical harm, predation, or impairment of reproduction. It is paramount that animals are left with their routines and habitats undisturbed.

Guidelines

Photographers should be familiar with the biology/ecology of their subjects and should **monitor their subjects for signs of stress** and abandon their pursuit if signs of stress are noted.

Keep an appropriate distance from your subjects. Where possible, stay on marked trails; do not push through dense vegetation and do not enter restricted areas, no matter how tempting it may be to venture closer. Exercising patience may allow the subject to feel more secure in the photographer's presence and it may venture closer on its own.

Drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) should not be used in close proximity to wildlife as their noise and presence may cause stress, physical harm or impairment of reproduction. An appropriate distance will vary between species, habitat, and time of year or situation, such as breeding season or presence of young. Always follow local regulations, as many areas restrict or ban drone use.

Take extreme care when photographing **wildlife with young**. Disturbance caused by the establishment of hides, camera noises, flashes, artificial lighting, approaching animals or too frequent visits may cause animals to abandon their young.

Avoid photographing **nesting/denning fauna**. Stress and disturbance can cause the parents to move their young to a location that may not be as safe as the original one. Photographers spending time at a nest/den, even if the person is not disturbing the wildlife, can open the nest up to an increased risk of predation. Recognise that the photographer's presence at a nest/den will reduce the likelihood of a parent returning with food thereby causing the young to go without food and warmth.

Reputable forums should prohibit members from posting/publishing images of nesting animals or images gained unethically.

Do not manipulate or handle wildlife in any way for the purposes of photography. Where a photograph is otherwise not attainable, an authority must be obtained, and a trained expert enlisted for any wildlife handling.

Be aware that different species (and even individuals within a species) will have different **distances at which they will be disturbed**. Digiscoping (pairing a camera with a spotting scope) or using a telephoto lens allows for great photos from great distance.

Avoid smoking in areas where wildlife is present. Animals can be sensitive to smells and cigarette smoke may disturb their natural behaviour, not to mention the potential fire risk.

6.1.2 Do not disturb habitat

Standard

Photographers must not manipulate the environment to the detriment of habitat to get the perfect shot; removing branches or other objects that interrupt the view to the subject has the potential to remove important shelter and increase the exposure of the subject to predation and weather.

Guidelines

Photographers should not push through dense vegetation or enter restricted areas.

Driving off road (including on beaches) should only be done in designated areas. If driving on beaches is authorised, keep close to the shoreline, avoid sand dunes and the high side of the beach (outside the tidal zone) that nesting birds use to breed.

Photographers should minimise any disturbances to the natural environment that could occur before, during, or even after photographing and/or recording is complete.

In south-west Western Australia, *Phytophthora* dieback affects more than 40 percent of the native plant species and can devastate bushland by changing the landscape and driving rare species toward extinction. Dieback is spread through the movement of soil and mud, especially by vehicles and footwear. Photographers should do their utmost to prevent the spread of the disease by observing signage in affected areas and following associated instructions, staying out of quarantined areas, not entering disease risk areas during or for a minimum of three days after rain and using washdown and boot cleaning stations.

6.1.3 Do no harm

Standard

Photographers must not feed fauna. It is an offence under the BC Act to feed fauna and fines apply for non-compliance. Using food to attract animals can disrupt their natural diet and behaviour and may increase their chances of predation by encouraging them to move from appropriate shelter or remain in a particular location for an extended period of time.

Guidelines

Photographers should not use call playback to attract wildlife during the species' breeding season as it may cause distress, disturb natural behaviour and attract the attention of predators. Use of call playback during the non-breeding season is discouraged as this can also cause distress (particularly if distress calls are unknowingly used).

Photographers should not use attractants such as scent or visual lures to attract animals as their altered behaviour may increase the chances of predation by encouraging them to move from appropriate shelter or remain in a particular location for an extended period of time.

6.1.4 Protect rare and threatened species

Guidelines

Photographers should be aware of the potential consequences of sharing the location of a rare sighting with the broader community. Many species are shy and can easily be disturbed by a sudden increase in human presence. Other species are subject to illegal poaching, therefore any information relating to the location or date of the sighting should be removed prior to releasing the image. Removing Exchangeable Image File Format (EXIF) metadata from a photo, which is hidden information stored within digital files, will ensure that GPS coordinates, date and time will not be attached to it.

Photographers should report threatened species sightings to DBCA using a Fauna Report Form available on the DBCA website at <https://www.dbca.wa.gov.au/management/threatened-species-and-communities/resources/threatened-and-priority-fauna-resources> along with a copy of any photographs. This information assists to protect and manage threatened species.

6.1.5 Support conservation

Guidelines

Photographers should recognise that all fauna are protected by legislation in Western Australia so they can be appreciated by current and future generations. Wildlife photographers can support fauna conservation not only by ensuring their actions have no negative impacts, but also by using their work to raise awareness and appreciation of Western Australia's unique fauna and supplying information about threatened fauna.

6.2 Respecting others

6.2.1 Respect private property

Guidelines

Photographers should respect the rights of the landowners and obtain permission prior to entering private property or other lands that do not have public access. Indigenous traditional lands may be subject to additional regulations and photographers should respect the rights of Traditional Owners and seek permission to enter Indigenous owned lands.

6.2.2 Respect other wildlife photographers

Guidelines

Photographers should be aware of the sightlines of other photographers in the area and treat others as they would wish to be treated.

Photographers should promote these Standards and Guidelines and encourage fellow photographers to do the same.

6.2.3 Respect other professionals in the field

Guidelines

Photographers should not disturb the work of others in the field. There may be researchers or conservation officers undertaking work in the area and photographers should be mindful of these activities.

6.3 Safety

6.3.1 Do your research

Guidelines

Photographers should be knowledgeable about the species and environment that they are recording in. They should also be aware of expected weather conditions they might encounter and plan accordingly.

6.3.2 Safety procedures

Guidelines

Photographers should always let someone know where they are going, and when they expect to return, particularly in challenging environments or more remote areas where risks may be greater.

6.4 Ensuring high welfare standards under approved programs

6.4.1 Minimise disturbance

Guidelines

All personnel have a responsibility to ensure that any person photographing during the capture, handling or release of fauna under approved programs minimise their impact on animal welfare. The **handling of fauna should always be avoided**, and if this is not possible, then handling times should always be minimised. Photographic activities should be conducted as a component of the approved fauna handling activities. **Fauna should not be handled simply to take photos or videos.**

Any planned photographic activities should be discussed prior to the capture, handling or release of animals. This provides an opportunity for discussion and negotiation around what is potentially feasible, but the final decision rests with the lead animal handler. These discussions should result in a mutually-agreed upon plan that is communicated to the rest of the team, particularly if it requires a departure from standard practices.

Talking and other human related noises should be minimised. Voices and actions should be quiet and calm whenever in the presence of animals, including when they are in carrying boxes, handling bags or within a trap.

While fauna are transported, handled or released, avoid any unnecessary interference with both the animals and the animal handler. This is particularly important while animals are handled because distractions, and particularly noise, caused by interruptions and unnecessary movement can cause stress to the animal through prolonged handling times, injuries to the animal and handler, and data recorded incorrectly or not at all. To reduce disruption, the animal handler may ask only those required to conduct the photography to remain in the immediate area.

Animal handling often takes place with the aid of a handling bag and consequently the animal may only be partially visible during this process. Taking the animal completely out of the bag for photography should only be done at the discretion of the animal handler. This is likely to

increase stress to the animal, may result in injuries and there is a high likelihood that the animal will escape, which are all undesirable outcomes. The preference is to photograph whole animals when the animal is released.

6.4.2 Releasing captured fauna

For some activities, such as fauna translocations, capture, handling and release times will be predetermined and are non-negotiable. Many Australian mammals are nocturnal therefore the use of suitable equipment (e.g., low-light capture technology) is highly recommended for night-time photography with minimal or no additional lighting. As above, the use of an artificial light source is discouraged. Researching best practice techniques and equipment used by experienced natural history photographers is also recommended. While footage taken during daylight hours is generally of a higher quality than night-time footage, the welfare of the animals should always be a higher priority.

When animals are released:

- a) No attempt should be made to recapture an animal once it has been released. All equipment e.g., cameras, tripods, lighting (if agreed), batteries, film/memory storage etc. should be prepared in advance and ready to go before arriving at the photography location.
- b) The number of people present should be minimised.
- c) Release sites will be selected based on suitability for the fauna released. As above, photographers should not physically alter the environment (e.g., remove habitat or vegetation).
- d) Photographers should set up shots prior to the release. Animals should not be held longer than planned and any set up needs to be calm and quiet.
- e) Filming should not be conducted from in front of an animal unless the camera is placed in position and the operator is located elsewhere. The camera position should be angled to the side and not impede the animal, allowing a clear path or escape route. The operator and all other observers are to remain behind or to the side of the animal as it is released.
- f) Choose a position to film from and remain in that location. If an animal heads toward you, remain calm, quiet and as still as possible.
- g) Remember that animals may have been in a stressful environment prior to their release, particularly due to capture, transport and handling. The length of time to observe animals following release should be minimised, as should exposure to bright lights, camera flashes or head torches. Lights should not be directed at the eyes of animals as this can result in temporary night blindness.
- h) Following the release of fauna, personnel should depart the area as calmly and quietly as possible.

7 Further Reading

Birdlife Australia. (2012). Ethical birding guidelines. Available at <https://birdlife.org.au/how-to/ethical-birdwatching-guidelines>

Royal Photographic Society (2007). The nature photographers' code of practice. Available at [The Nature Photographer's Code of Practice](#)

8 Glossary of Terms

Breeding season: A period during which a species breeds. This includes activities such as mate searching, courtship display, mating, incubation of eggs, feeding and raising of young. This will differ between species and even within the range of a species. Some species are continuous breeders (can breed year-round), and others are opportunistic breeders (can breed whenever conditions of their environment become favourable).

Call playback: The use of a pre-recorded animal call to elicit a response from a target species.

Digiscoping: Using a camera with a spotting scope to record distant images through the eyepiece of an optical telescope.

Disturb: To chase, drive, follow, harass, herd or hunt fauna by any means, or to engage in an activity that has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of altering the natural behaviour of fauna to its detriment. This may include causing the animal to stop feeding or drinking, leave a nest/den (that it is building or has eggs/young), cease social interactions (such as preening, feeding young, mating) and/or leaving the area all together.

Fauna: An animal that belongs to a native species or taxon. All fauna in Western Australia, including birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and some fish and invertebrates are protected under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. The term wildlife has the same definition.

Photograph: Includes digital images or moving visual records.

Stress: An animal is considered to be in a state of stress if abnormal behaviour or extreme adjustments in its behaviour or physiology are required to cope with adverse aspects of its environment. This includes increased alertness, erratic or repetitive movements or calling, displays of aggression and/or distress calls, flushing or becoming motionless (freezing). Different species will display different signs of stress.

Take fauna: To kill, injure, harvest or capture fauna by any means or to cause or permit any of these to be done.