



SUSTAINABLE WILDLIFE TOURISM

Guidelines and Advice For Sustainable Wildlife Tourism
in Iceland, Greenland, Faroe Islands and Norway

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FOREWORD

The Wild North project is dedicated to sustainable development and success of wildlife and nature tourism operations within the North Atlantic region. Our vision is for a wildlife and nature tourism industry that is undertaken in a responsible and sustainable way across the region.

The Wild North brings together and assists researchers and the tourism industry to monitor and understand the specific and unique wildlife and nature of this stunning region. From this research, The Wild North Code of Conduct has been created to advise and guide tourism professionals and the general public so that both you and the wildlife have the best possible experience.

This booklet contains a general guide for watching wildlife as well as specific codes for whales and dolphins, seals, foxes and bird species. Please take time to read these codes to best enjoy and care for this most pristine of areas.

Stephen Midgley

Chairman

THE WILD NORTH

PARTNERS

Húsavík Research Center

North Sailing

www.northsailing.is

Gentle Giants

www.gentlegiants.is

Húsavík Whale Museum

www.whalemuseum.is

The Icelandic Seal Center

www.selasetur.is

Illugastaðir / æðarvarp

Selasigling ehf

www.sealwatching.is

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www.holar.is

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Skagaströnd Municipality

www.skagastrond.is

Northern Nature Guides

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Arctic Fox Centre

www.melrakki.is

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GENERAL

Keep a lookout. As soon as you see wildlife, evaluate the situation; identify the species, behaviour, geography of the area and whether there are young in the group, then adjust your behaviour accordingly. Ideally, animals should be showing the same behaviour when you leave as when you arrived.

Approach slowly and cautiously. Make sure your movements are steady and predictable. Do not approach wildlife directly from in front or behind, use an oblique angle.

Keep your distance. The most rewarding and authentic wildlife encounters are those where the animals are behaving naturally. The closer you get, the less natural the behavior is likely to be. Be aware of distance guidelines. If young animals are present then distances should be increased.

Be aware of disturbance behaviours. Ideally, move away before any signs of disturbance are seen (e.g. 'heads up' responses, alarm calls, sudden movements or aggressive behaviour). Be aware of what constitutes normal behaviour compared to signs of disturbance for different species.

Be patient. Encounters should be on the animals' terms. If an animal moves away do not follow it. Relaxed animals often come back of their own accord.

Keep to paths. Be aware that regular use of routes can lead to wildlife becoming accustomed to your presence, but over-use of routes can drive away sensitive wildlife. If in doubt, ask experts.

Avoid splitting up groups of animals or boxing animals in. If other people are watching the same groups of animals, stay on the same side as them to allow a safe escape route for the animals to open water, shelter or the rest of the group.

Avoid feeding. Using food as an enticement to bring wildlife closer can be very harmful to them and have a negative effect on their natural behaviour.

Consider the size of your group in relation to the sensitivity of the situation. We recommend the use of appropriate behaviour to minimise impacts in natural areas by following Leave no Trace guidelines.



People only. Pets should not be taken on wildlife-watching trips as chances of seeing wildlife will be reduced and the probability of disturbing wildlife will be increased.

In addition, we recommend you:

- Refrain from using flash photography around wildlife.
- Record and submit sightings of key or unusual species.
- Report any stranded or injured animals to the relevant local body.
- Report wildlife crime if you see it occurring.

Approaching By Foot

- Keep to paths and tracks. If there are no paths, ask your group to spread out to avoid the creation of new tracks that can lead to erosion.
- Be aware of sensitive flora, nests or dens that are in the area and avoid disturbing them.

Approaching By Vehicle

- Keep to surfaced roads to avoid habitat disturbance. If driving off road is necessary, follow existing tracks.
- Drive at a speed appropriate to cause minimal disturbance to the surrounding environment and wildlife.
- Avoid prolonged idling of the vehicle's engine when stopped to avoid unnecessary noise and air pollution.

Approaching By Boat

- Approach wildlife from an oblique angle. Avoid separating or splitting up groups of wildlife.
- Reduce speed when approaching wildlife both on the coast line and in the water.
- Put engine into neutral whenever possible around wildlife and engage the propeller only when sure it is clear of all wildlife.

Breeding Animals/Mothers & Young

Take extra care during sensitive times of year in places where animals may be breeding, on nests or with their young.

Never approach young animals that are alone.

Do not come between adults and their young.

Approaching By Kayak

- The silent approach of a kayak may cause sudden alarm. Keep movements steady and predictable and do not approach directly.
Large animals can present a threat to kayakers and should be given plenty of space.
- Be aware that the constant and unusual movement of the paddles may disturb wildlife. A lower paddle angle may create fewer disturbances.
- The sound of paddles may also create disturbance. Try to paddle as silently as possible where safe to do so.
- If you encounter wildlife in a sea cave, back out slowly as you may be blocking their escape route. Stay close to the wall where safe to do so.
- If going ashore, choose your landing area carefully so that any noise or activity will not disturb wildlife and or ground-nesting birds.
- Avoid seal haul-out sites and seabird colonies. Be aware of your access rights.
- Avoid landing in protected areas.
- Keep the group together in sensitive areas so you can advise them on suitable behaviour as needed.
- If possible, carry your kayak (rather than drag it) when moving over land.

SEALS

Limit the distance between yourself and seals to a minimum of 50m.

If seals show any signs of disturbance, move slowly away from them to a greater distance until their behaviour has stopped.

Seals are wild animals and carry the threat of both injury and disease. Therefore you should never attempt to touch a seal with your hands or an object.

Refrain from throwing objects towards seals both hauled-out and in the water.

Seals are curious animals and often choose to approach humans. When this occurs keep calm and still until the seals' natural actions have taken it away from your vicinity.

Avoid the use of flash photography when photographing seals.

Approaching By Land

- Seals often haul-out on islands and skerries during low tide periods. It is important to know the tide times of your area, so as not to be stranded by an in-coming tide. Always remain vigilant of your ability to return to shore.
- When approaching the animals walk slowly with small movements and avoid speaking loudly. It is just as important to leave the area the same way.
- Use walking paths where available to access the seal viewing areas.
- Limit the distance between yourself and resting seals to a minimum of 50m. This distance should be increased to 100m during pupping, weaning and moulting periods of the anticipated species. Consult a local expert for details on these dates.
- Possible negative impact on the animals increases with the number of people in the vicinity of seals. If there is a group of people with the seals, keep to an extended distance and wait for the other people to leave the area before entering yourself.
- Try to remain on the shore side of hauled-out seals, always allowing the animal an escape route to the water.
- Refrain from walking between or splitting up groups of seals, especially mothers and pups.
- Pups are often left alone whilst their parents hunt for food. Do not approach an abandoned pup and keep your distance to a minimum of 100m.



Approaching By Sea

- Seals often haul-out on exposed rocks and skerries during low tide periods. Be sure to remain vigilant for possible submerged objects in the shallow waters and be aware of the tide times and heights for the area.
- Approach hauled-out seals slowly from an oblique angle using a “no wake” speed of no greater than 5 knots.
- Remain at a minimum distance of 50m from hauled out seals.
- Keep in mind to minimize the time that the vessel stops outside a haul out site, in order to have the least possible effect on the animals. The maximum limit is 15 minutes at each haul-out site.
- If the animals show any signs of disturbance (e.g. many seals are vigilant and paying attention to the vessel), it is important to move away from the haul out site before the animals flush into the sea. Do this calmly and slowly until the signs of disturbance stop.
- Seal haul-out sites are especially sensitive to disturbance. Remain calm and quiet aboard when in the vicinity of a haul-out site to reduce your impact on the seals.
- If stationary at a haul-out site and safe to do so, disengage the engine or place the boat in neutral.
- Seals are curious animals and often approach humans. However, the vessel should never follow or rapidly change direction to directly approach seals that are in the sea.
- If seals choose to come within 50m of the vessel, disengage the propeller until the animal is seen at a safe distance to re-engage.
- Avoid positioning the vessel between, or splitting up groups of, seals.

Signs Of Disturbance

VISUAL

Head up / Vigilance

Shuffling / Moving

Rushing or Flushing to the water

SOUND

Barking

Grunting

Growling

- If more than one vessel is present, open communications and organise to prevent the surrounding or boxing in of the seals.
- Refrain from sounding your horn within 300m of a seal haul-out site.
- Do not throw anything over board. Remember to leave the environment and nature as you entered it. Garbage should be held on board the vessel until you return to shore where it can be disposed of in an appropriate manner.

FOXES

Keep a distance of at least 40m from foxes.

Stay calm. Remaining still and quiet will allow foxes to maintain their natural actions.

If foxes display any signs of disturbance, move slowly and quietly away to a farther distance.

If alerting signs continue, move away from area.

Try to limit your time in the immediate vicinity of the foxes to 20 minutes. Extended periods of exposure between foxes and humans can cause over familiarisation to human contact leading to the taming of the animals.

Limit the number of people in an experience with the foxes. If people are already in the vicinity, wait at a longer distance for them to move on before entering the area yourself.

Avoid surrounding foxes. Always leave a clear escape route for the animals.

Be patient. Never try to force an action or interaction.

Never chase the foxes. This causes stress to the animal and can lead to territory abandonment.

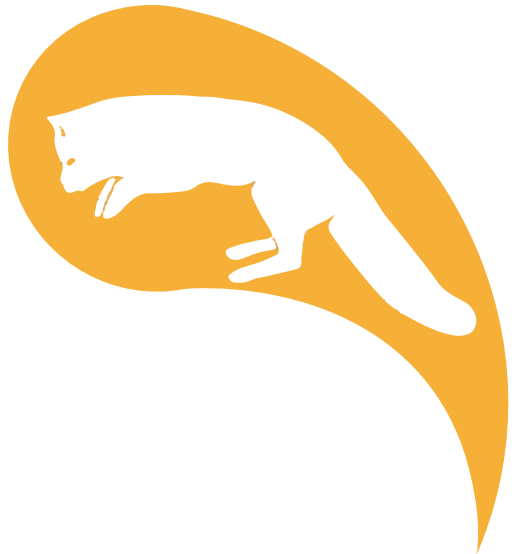
Do not feed foxes or their cubs. Feeding of the animals can lead to a lack of hunting skills and habits, and the transfer of these onto future generations.

Be vigilant not to pass between or separate a family of foxes. Stay still and calm and wait for the entire group to pass.

Refrain from howling or trying to mimic foxes vocalisations in the known vicinity of foxes.

Do not try to touch or pat the foxes. Although arctic foxes are calm and friendly they are wild animals.

Dog should be leashed in areas where arctic foxes are known to be present.



Dens

- If you notice a fox den, pass briskly and quietly.
- Keep a distance of 40m from dens. Staying too close prevents the parents from bringing food to hungry pups or leaving the den to hunt.
- If a fox within or outside the den barks, screams or shows any of the signs of disturbance, back away from the den slowly and quietly and keep a longer distance between yourself and the den until the signs of disturbance stop.
- Do not place food or drink outside of the den to entice foxes out.
- Never knowingly block or obstruct the entrance to dens to either block animals inside or outside. This causes stress to the animal and can lead to den or territory abandonment.
- Refrain from using an object to intrude inside a den to provoke a reaction from the animal. This can damage the den as well as causing the animal stress and uncertainty to leave the den.
- Do not intentionally damage the dens in any way.
- Avoid answering a call of nature in the vicinity of a den.

Signs Of Disturbance

VISUAL

- Tail up
- Flattening of ears
- Fleeing

SOUND

- Barking
- Screaming
- Yelping
- Moaning
- Howling

Cubs

- Be calm and quiet if you spot a cub. Do not shout or wave people over.
- Stay still and quiet at a distance of at least 40m away from cubs.
- Do not try to feed the cubs or entice them closer with food.
- Stay still and quiet if a cub approaches but do not move towards or away from the cub. Wait in place until the cub moves away from your location.
- Do not walk between or split apart parents and their cubs.

BIRDS

To avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming.

Move in a slow and calm manner when in the known vicinity of birds

Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas, or for attracting any species that is Threatened, Endangered, or of Special Concern, or is rare to the local area.

Keep well back from nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display areas, and important feeding sites. In such sensitive areas, if there is a need for extended observation, photography, filming, or recording, try to use a hide, and take advantage of natural cover.

Use artificial light sparingly for filming or photography, especially for close-ups.

Before advertising the presence of a rare bird, evaluate the potential for disturbance to the bird, its surroundings, and other people in the area. Proceed only if access can be controlled, disturbance minimized, and permission has been obtained from private landowners. The sites of rare nesting birds should be divulged only to the proper conservation authorities.

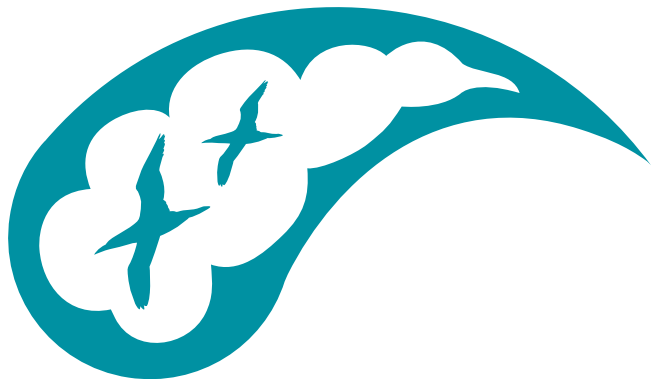
Stay on existing roads, trails, and paths where possible and keep habitat disturbance to a minimum.

Respect the law and the rights of others.

Do not enter private property without the owner's explicit permission.

Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas, both at home and abroad.

Practice common courtesy in contacts with other people. Your exemplary behaviour will generate goodwill with birders and non-birders alike.



Eider ducks and duck husbandry

- Eider duck colonies are commonly protected by farmers during nesting season (April – June). You should not enter private property without the owner's explicit permission, especially during this period.
- Keep close observations on what lies under foot when in or close to Eider duck colonies to avoid accidental damage to nests or eggs.
- If an Eider duck is scared from its nest, immediately retreat from the vicinity to allow it to return.

Group birding

- Whether organized or impromptu, group bird watching requires special care.
- Each individual in the group, in addition to the obligations spelled out above, has responsibilities as a Group Member.
- Respect the interests, rights, and skills of fellow birders, as well as people participating in other legitimate outdoor activities. Freely share your knowledge and experience, except where it may cause disturbance or harm. Be especially helpful to beginning birders.
- If you witness unethical birding behaviour, assess the situation, and intervene if you think it prudent. When interceding, inform the person(s) of the inappropriate action, and attempt, within reason, to have it stopped. If the behaviour continues, document it and notify appropriate individuals or organizations.
- Group Leader Responsibilities [tour operators]
 - Be an exemplary ethical role model for the group. Teach through word and example.
 - Keep groups to a size that limits impact on the environment, and does not interfere with others using the same area.
- Learn and inform the group of any special circumstances applicable to the areas being visited (e.g., no tape recorders allowed).
- Acknowledge that professional tour companies bear a special responsibility to place the welfare of birds and the benefits of public knowledge ahead of the company's commercial interests. Ideally, leaders should keep track of tour sightings, document unusual occurrences, and submit records to appropriate organizations.
- Ensure everyone in the group knows of and practices this code.

Signs Of Disturbance

VISUAL

- Taking flight
- Dive mobbing
- "Flushing" into the water or from trees ground

SOUND

- Loud squawking in your direction
- Increased noise and/or change of call
- Sudden ending of bird song/calls

WHALES

Approach cautiously. Always be alert for the presence of marine animals and, when sighted, approach them cautiously using an oblique angle. When you draw level, maintain a parallel course to the animal or group.

Do not approach directly from the front or behind.

Slow down. Maintain a wake speed of no more than 5mph in the caution zone (100-300m from the animal).

Within the caution zone (100-300m) assess how your actions may affect the animal and take steps to minimise disturbance. For example, do not sound your horn or make other loud noises.

All vessels should remain at a minimum distance of 100m from whales and dolphins.

If approached by marine mammals, and where it is safe to do so, put the engine in neutral and allow the animals to pass.

Do not engage propellers until the animals are observed at the surface and clear of the vessel.

If there are other vessels near the animals, establish contact with them and co-ordinate your actions to avoid disturbance. Stay on the same side of the animals as the other vessels.

Avoid having more than two vessels within 300m of the animals.



CAUTION ZONE

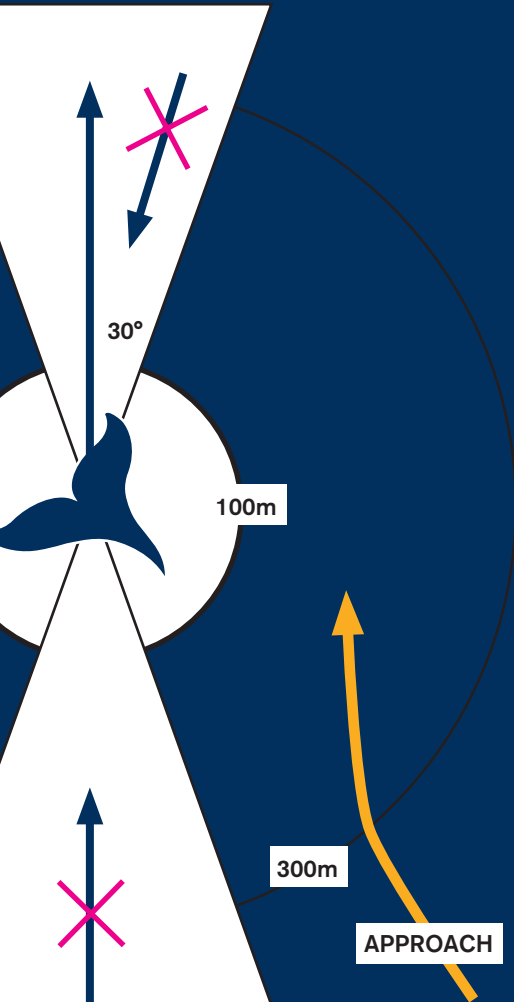
Signs Of Disturbance

VISUAL

Rapid changes in direction.

Slapping surface of the water with flippers or tail.

Long, deep dives.



Should dolphins choose to bow-ride, maintain a steady course and speed. When you need to break off the encounter, slow gradually to a stop and allow the animals to leave of their own accord. When the animals leave, do not follow.

Minimise the length of time spent with whales and dolphins to no more than one hour.

When leaving the animals, follow the same speed, distance and direction procedures as for approaching them.

If you are returning to an area where animals have recently been seen, approach slowly.

Do not throw anything over board. Remember to leave the environment and nature as you entered it. Garbage should be held on board until you return to shore where it can be disposed of in the appropriate manner.

The Wild North does not encourage feeding, touching, riding or swimming with any marine mammals.



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