

OTTAWA'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

How close is too close for wildlife watching?



KATHARINE FLETCHER

How close is too close for wildlife watching?
“Look at that bear! I’m going to get a great photo!” Off the photographer ran, straight for the animal.

Another Darwin-award moment ...

Normally sensible people can be transformed into fools when nature’s serendipity presents a golden opportunity for a stellar photograph.

Although you’d think people would know better than to run towards a black bear, *Homo sapiens* frequently exhibits thoughtless behaviour towards wild animals instead of being sensible ... and acting respectfully.

But what’s respectful?

MUD LAKE MADNESS

Remember the commotion at Mud Lake – that popular wildlife watching spot near Ottawa’s Britannia water filtration plant – during the last two winters? The Ottawa Field Naturalist Club’s Facebook page exploded with comments because some photographers had positioned tripods semi-permanently to shoot photos of great gray and snowy owls. Come spring, others created a similar zoo-like atmosphere when great horned owls were nesting.

Some birders brought live mice from a pet shop, and threw them to these birds of prey. The owls swooped down, wings beating the air and talons bared to grab the rodents, then to carry them aloft to devour them. The adult owls fed some mice to their young.

So what?

Habituation is one issue – the owls came to associate people with easy food. This matters because learning to hunt for wild food is important for the continued survival of wild owls.

Such scenarios as above illustrate how people can unwittingly place pressure on wildlife. Running towards a bear not only puts a person at risk of maiming or death, it simultaneously teaches the animal to associate human beings with erratic and threatening (predatory) behaviour.

At Mud Lake, several issues were at play: crowding wildlife; throwing pet mice at owls knowing they’ll be eaten (“baiting”); and habituating wildlife to food sources provided by people.

CODES OF ETHICS

Best wildlife-watching practices can be pieced together from already existing codes of ethics drawn up by longtime field naturalists ranging like guides who take clients to view marine mammals, or grizzly bears, or migrating warblers, among others.

The [Canadian Wildlife Federation](#) emphasizes [Leave no Trace](#) principles. These include not feeding wildlife, disposing of waste



A polar bear rests in the distance as onlookers keep theirs. A guide with a rifle stands at the ready.

properly, and leaving what we discover in its place – including animals.

[Vancouver Whale Watch](#) is based in Richmond, B.C. On a trip with them where we discovered a superpod of 88 orcas, the outfitter had already explained guidelines established by the Pacific Whale Watch Association, where boats must stay a minimum of 100 metres from whales.

Find Nahanni River Adventures’ guidelines on its website. One of this organization’s crucial tips is, “observe animals from the distance they consider safe.” This is particularly instructive because we’re encouraged to think like a wild animal, to consider what is acceptable from the animal’s viewpoint (not our own).

The Nahanni organization continues, “Learn wild animal signals that tell you that you are too close. This is your signal to sit or stand quietly or move slowly away.”

INTERPRETING ANIMAL-SPEAK

In the absence of actual words, what animal behaviour is important? Bears may rise on their hind legs to snuff our scent – before charging. Birds may get disturbed and fly away – or even fly towards us in an attempt to frighten us

off, perhaps missing the opportunity to catch an insect which could have fed them or their nestlings. This is stressful for wildlife.

If you own a pet, you know animal-speak. You understand your pet’s anxieties, and can read its body language when. Extend this compassion to wild animals. Teach children, friends, colleagues to appreciate wildlife by keeping a respectful, safe distance so you all become wildlife stewards.

Long-time birder Moira Farr explains, “I think birders and photographers who genuinely care about wildlife understand that ‘it’s not all about you.’ With so many pressures on birds as it is, adding the element of constant human presence and intervention (i.e. baiting) simply does not seem right.” ■

[Katharine Fletcher’s](#) environmental column appears here every issue. She is author of *Historical Walks: The Gatineau Park Story* | www.katharinefletcher.com