

Canadian Wildlife Service – Environment Canada
Guidelines for Visiting Seabird Colonies in Canada

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Canadian Wildlife Service Seabird Technical Committee

Introduction

These guidelines are designed to increase awareness of the sensitivities of Canada's breeding seabirds to disturbance, and of the regulations in place to protect the birds and their habitats. They provide guidance on appropriate behaviour to follow when at or near colonies of nesting seabirds.

Seabird Life

In general, seabirds have long life spans and low reproductive rates, with many species only laying one egg per year. They often nest on islands, on cliff-faces or in other inaccessible locations to avoid predators, and several species may nest together in mixed colonies. Some seabirds nest on ledges or on open rock, while others nest under boulders, in crevices or in burrows they have excavated in the soil. Colonies in Canada range in size from a few pairs of nesting terns or gulls to over a million pairs of Leach's Storm-petrels.

Although most species spend much of the year at sea, spring and summer are especially important to seabirds at their colonies. This is the time they court, mate, lay and incubate their eggs, and raise and feed their young. Nesting seasons along Canada's southern coasts run from March through September, and extend through the ice-free period in Canada's Arctic.

Colonial nesting allows efficient use of limited space. It also enables seabirds to put up a common defense by mobbing against ground and aerial predators such as foxes, raccoons, gulls and eagles. However, it can also have serious disadvantages. Colonies are vulnerable to habitat loss and destruction, and to the impacts of catastrophic events such as storms, disease, and oil spills. Colonial birds are particularly vulnerable to the effects of human disturbance.

Humans and Seabirds

For hundreds of years, seabirds were exploited for meat, eggs, and feathers, and many nesting colonies were disrupted by human disturbance and development. The Great Auk, a flightless colonial-nesting seabird once present by the hundreds of thousands in the North Atlantic, was harvested to extinction by the early 1800s.

Concern over severe declines in the numbers of seabirds nesting in coastal regions of Canada's eastern provinces contributed to the passage of the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* in 1917. Changing economies and societal values have led to the abandonment of many coastal islands, allowing seabirds to re-colonize many former nesting sites.

Seabirds nesting along Canada's coasts are now protected by the *Migratory Birds Convention Act*, or by corresponding provincial or territorial legislation, which make it illegal to disturb or harass birds. Most protection extends to the adult birds as well as to their nests, eggs and young. Many colonies are afforded additional protection as Migratory Bird Sanctuaries,

National Wildlife Areas or National Park Reserves under federal jurisdiction or as Ecological Reserves, Wildlife Habitat Areas, Wildlife Management Areas or Wildlife Conservation Areas under provincial or territorial legislation. These designations may add specific regulations that go beyond the guidelines presented here, and most protected colonies are completely closed to visitation during the spring and summer nesting periods.

Under Canada's new *Species at Risk Act*, several species of coastal birds are classified as being at risk of extinction. Roseate Terns, Marbled Murrelets, Ivory Gulls, Piping Plovers, and eastern populations of Harlequin Ducks and Barrow's Goldeneye, are among the species currently listed as being at risk in Canada. These birds, their residences, and their critical habitat are given additional protection by this act.

In addition to these designations, there are numerous provincial, territorial, regional and municipal acts, policies and guidelines which may regulate visitors' activities. Before approaching coastal island or mainland colonies, prospective visitors should contact relevant agencies and local landowners to determine what restrictions may apply, and to obtain any necessary permits.

Impacts of Disturbance

Seabird nesting colonies throughout North America have seen increased visitation by private boaters, picnickers, tourists, and fishers. Many people are not aware that approaching colonies, landing boats, letting pets run loose, walking across nesting areas, or staying too long in one spot can affect these birds. Even approaching too closely by water can put seabirds at risk.

Disturbance can cause seabirds to abandon their nests or young, or to use valuable energy reserves for defense, instead of incubating eggs and feeding young. The presence of humans in close proximity to nests may prevent parent birds from returning to protect and feed their young, and expose eggs or chicks to predation, and to the lethal effects of heat, cold and rain. As many species of colonial seabirds nest in hidden crevices, burrows, vegetation or on top of exposed rocky ledges, a careless step in a colony can destroy a bird's eggs.

When parent birds are flushed, many seabird chicks wander from their nest site and may fall to the water, be taken by predators, or pecked to death by neighbouring birds. Some species are particularly sensitive at certain stages of their breeding cycle. For example, murre chicks fledge in July and August, primarily in the late afternoon and evening, when disturbance can cause premature fledging and high chick mortality.

How you can help

In general, because human disturbance of nesting seabirds puts their eggs and chicks at such risk, people should stay away from all active breeding colonies between March and September.

Human activities in waters around nesting colonies, such as fishing and boating, can also put seabirds at risk. These activities should be kept far enough away to avoid flushing birds from their nests, or causing them to dive at you in an attempt to drive you away from the colony. Colonial nesting seabirds often share rocky islands and ledges with other wildlife, such as seals or sealions. You know you are too close if these marine mammals become restless and plunge

into the water. In all cases where you may be disturbing seabirds, move away as quickly and quietly as possible.

Canadian Wildlife Service Guidelines for Visiting Seabird Colonies

Take special care to minimize your impact when at or near seabird colonies, as human presence can cause serious disturbance to nesting birds. Remember, it is illegal to disturb or kill migratory birds, or to destroy their nests or eggs, and offenses are punishable by fines or jail sentences. By respecting the birds and adhering to these guidelines, visitors may be able to gain a unique wildlife experience near a seabird colony, without impacting the birds themselves.

In general, the Canadian Wildlife Service recommends that people stay off seabird islands and colonies, and avoid any disturbance of migratory birds, during the breeding season. However, in cases where visitation is permitted, these guidelines should be followed.

On land:

- Determine if the colony is a protected site (see contacts listed below)
- Obtain permission from land owners, and secure any necessary permits from management agencies in advance (see contact information provided).
- Only spend brief periods at a colony, and do not visit on cold, wet or windy days or very hot days. Visit colonies at mid-day early in the season when weather is cool, and in mid-morning and late afternoon on warm summer days. Avoid colonies at dusk and dawn, when seabirds are either feeding after guarding their nests all night, or are settling down for the night. Do not visit colonies of nocturnal seabirds at night.
- Obey all signs at the colony, and stay on paths and behind barriers. Do not enter areas where nests, eggs, chicks or dive-bombing parents are present.
- Be extremely careful where you walk, looking down to avoid crushing camouflaged eggs or chicks, and return the same way that you entered the colony.
- Avoid loud noises or sudden movements, and speak only in a low voice.
- Take everything you bring back with you, as seabirds can mistake trash for food.
- Do not build fires, cut trees or collect vegetation on seabird islands.
- Do not bring pets any where near seabird colonies.

On the water:

- Maintain a minimum distance of at least 100 metres from all areas of the island or colony occupied by seabirds, unless otherwise authorized by permit.
- Always travel at steady speeds when close to seabird colonies, moving parallel to the shore, rather than approaching the colony directly.
- Avoid any sharp or loud noises, do not blow horns or whistles, and maintain constant engine noise levels.
- Do not pursue seabirds swimming on the water surface, and avoid large concentrations of seabirds on the water.
- Where possible, only use certified tour boats or accredited guides.
- Anchor large vessels, such as cruise ships, at least 500 m from the nesting islands and only approach in smaller vessels.
- Avoid colonies that are spread over clusters of islands, as these areas tend to present hazards to navigation, and a single visit will disturb many birds in a confined area.
- Never dump oil or waste overboard, as even small amounts of oil can kill birds and other marine life, and habitats may take years to recover.

From the air:

- Helicopters and other aircraft should keep well away from nesting cliffs or islands, as aircraft can cause severe disturbance to seabird colonies, and there is a serious risk of collision with flying birds.
- Aircraft should keep at least 300 metres above occupied colonies, and at least 500 m to the side of colonies.