

BirdLife Australia's
Guidelines for Photographing Beach-nesting Birds

Beach-nesting birds, like the Hooded Plover, face an abundance of threats when it comes to trying to successfully breed. Direct threats like stepping on a nest or a predator eating eggs are easy to understand, while others are a lot less obvious. Disturbance is one of the biggest threats these birds face but its impacts may be undetectable to us.

In south-eastern Australia, Hooded Plovers breed in spring and summer during which time they lay two or three eggs directly on the sand (visit www.birdlife.org.au/documents/BNB-Manualpart1bsm.pdf to find out breeding time of other species). If the eggs survive the 28 days to hatching, the chicks then leave the nest and move around the beach looking for food from day one. Over five weeks, they feed on the beach and run to cover when the parents warn them of dangers. These vulnerable eggs and chicks depend on their camouflage, together with their parents clever behaviours, to stay safe. However, the time that parents spend away from the nest trying to keep its location hidden or distract approaching threats, or the hours that chicks spend in hiding, can result in nest failure or chick death. Unless you are highly trained and experienced and understand these birds well, it is impossible to detect when you are the reason why the nest has failed, or the chicks have died.

These birds are stunning, with high contrasting features and picturesque habitats, and their chicks are possibly some of the cutest of any species! However, as a photographer hoping to capture this in a beautiful image, you could be deadly to these birds.

So what can you do to ensure your images carry no consequences? Here are some guidelines developed by BirdLife Australia's Beach-nesting Birds program to assist:

- Friends of the Hooded Plover groups have undertaken extensive training, and many have over a decade of experience in understanding the behaviour of these cryptic birds. Get in touch with the group and organize to **visit the birds with a trained observer** and initially focus less on achieving the perfect image and more on the birds and their behaviours.
- Beaches are really busy places, and it is often the compounding impacts from multiple types of disturbance that ultimately cause the birds stress:
 - **Avoid hot or windy days**, as the birds are already impacted by these naturally tough conditions.
 - **Avoid high tides or large swells**, as there is less room to move on the beach and you're more likely to get too close for the bird's comfort.
 - **Be watchful for predators and keep your distance if they are present.** Most predators of beach-nesting birds are very clever and may have already been in the area watching and waiting for an opportunity to arise when the parents are distracted and separated from their chicks. In particular, gulls, ravens, kestrels and magpies can be sitting in the dune or foraging along the beach, but also off leash dogs may be curious and attracted to your presence.
- Use a **telephoto lens of at least 400mm** if you are wanting a close-up photo of any beach-nesting birds - getting too close to these birds can cause them unnecessary stress.
- Know the breeding season of the beach-nesting birds you want to photograph and **avoid times when nests and/or chicks may be present.** In the non-breeding season, many will flock into larger groups which makes photography a breeze. You will also likely capture interesting aggressive behaviours in the flock, and even a range of ages and plumage types. The lighting in Autumn and Winter can result in some perfect conditions for photography.

During the breeding season (August to April for Hooded Plovers)

- **BirdLife Australia recommend never targeting active nests or chicks of Beach-nesting birds for photographs.** Never take advantage of the signed and fenced areas that signal a breeding area – these are in place to minimize disturbance, not attract disturbance. Photographs of nests and chicks used by BirdLife Australia in promoting conservation of these birds, have been taken by highly experienced individuals who understand the birds’ behaviour, operate by strict time and distance limits, and minimize disturbance.
- **Never knowingly approach a nest or chicks**, this can and has resulted in the failure of nests or chicks. You may have seen amazing photos of birds displaying to predators or heartbreaking images of a predator attacking a chick – when our team have asked further questions of the photographer’s behaviour, we have learnt that the photographer was taking photos of the chicks and the parents were separated from the chicks due to the photographer’s presence. A predator has entered the area and the photographer has remained to capture the unfolding events – their presence continuing to interfere with the parent birds’ ability to intervene and defend their chicks. In most cases it hasn’t even occurred to the photographer that they played a role in the demise of the chicks. Your impact can be greater than you realise.
- On many beaches, land managers and volunteers are actively trying to protect beach-nesting birds by providing cues to beach-users on how best to use the beach. **Read the beach signage and respect management fences** but always remember that they are only a guide and that adults, nests and chicks maybe outside of these boundaries. Entering into fenced areas disturbs protected wildlife, which may breach legislation, such as the *Wildlife Act* in Victoria, and can result in fines. Also remember that not all nests and chick sites will be signed and fenced, so the absence of fencing is not a guide to signal these birds won’t be breeding.
- It can be really difficult to know if Hooded Plovers are nesting or have chicks, which is why it is suggested to avoid the breeding season altogether. However, if you are taking photos during the breeding season it is important to **watch the behaviour of adults** and remember these additional things:
 - Never walk above the high-tide mark and **always remain on the wet sand** when observing these birds.
 - **Never photograph these birds on hot days or windy days.** If they have a nest or chicks, exposure to extreme temperatures can kill in only minutes without parents incubating or brooding. The sand can also bury a nest within minutes.
 - When a person approaches a nesting area, the incubating adult will quickly run towards the water’s edge, distancing itself from the nest and allowing camouflage to do its job. This might mean you first see the bird low on the beach and have no idea there is a nest. You should always assume that a bird during these months either has a nest or chicks. Therefore, **don’t stay longer than 10 mins photographing adult birds** as they may be waiting for you to leave so they can return to their nest.
 - The chick phase is when the birds are most vulnerable. If you know the birds have a chick or chicks, you should never get close to the family group, and most of all never get between parents and their chicks, nor chicks and the upper beach and dunes. You may be able to capture a photo from **at least 100 metres** or if you are walking past the area along the water’s edge, to

pause for no more than 30 seconds to point and shoot an image. To spend any more time in this zone may mean you are highlighting them to predators.

- The parent birds will also try and lead you away from the chicks, at first this might not be obvious, and they might just look like they are walking in front of you. But if you have got too close to their chicks, this behaviour intensifies and they may start to pretend to look injured, dragging a wing or even falling over. Your initial reaction may be to back away, but it is safest to **slowly follow the bird**, as they are leading you away - you are at real risk of crushing a chick.

Adapted from The Photo Lab article by Mark Lethlean (BNB Volunteer and Photographer)



Flocking Hooded Plovers (Photographer Dan Lees) – Taken during the non-breeding season, by an experienced observer, with a Sigma APO 150-500mm F5-6.3 DG OS HSM attached to a Canon 80D.



If you are keen to find out more, or help conserve your local beach-nesting birds, visit www.birdlife.org.au/beach or email beachnestingbirds@birdlife.org.au