

# Good Birders Don't Flash White iPhones iEtiquette in the Field



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[blog.aba.org/2012/03/ietiquette.html](http://blog.aba.org/2012/03/ietiquette.html)

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## Seventy-eight Years Ago in Birding Etiquette:

**“Gadzooks, Chester, will you put that thing away? Flipping those white pages is spooking the bird and distracting my sightline!”**

**“Sorry, Winston, it’s my new Peterson field guide. It’s revolutionary! It lets you ID the bird without—”**

**K’POW!**

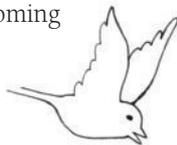
**“Good shot, boys! We got the bird! Now let’s figure out what we saw.”**

I love my iPhone. I hate your iPhone.

My iPhone is loaded with a bookcase of field guides. My iPhone has a thousand bird songs and calls. My iPhone is my safety net and my GPS. My iPhone shows me where others are seeing good birds.

Your iPhone plays ringtones that disrupt my tranquility. Your iPhone mimics birds and fools me into chasing a recording. Your iPhone lures birds into expending energy unproductively. Your iPhone distracts you from the natural world.

If only “my iPhone” vs. “your iPhone” were so straightforward! (See Noah Strycker’s article, “iLike my iPod!” *Birding*, November/December 2005, pp. 666–669.) I’m an iPhone-carrying birder and I write about apps, but I’m the first to growl when I hear the *ba-da-bing* of an incoming text message while I’m walking in the woods. And I hate playback—oh, except that time I



“I love my iPhone. I hate your iPhone.” The recent proliferation of “apps”—handheld digital gizmos for learning about birds—adds a new layer of nuance and ambivalence to the eternally touchy topic of field etiquette for birders. Do apps enhance or diminish the user’s birding experience? How do apps affect the experiences of *other* birders in the general vicinity of the app-wielding birder? Are apps—especially those with playback capability—bad for birds?

In a departure from our usual product-review format, “Tools of the Trade” columnist Diana Doyle explores these questions as a series of mini-commentaries. What do you think about apps and field etiquette? Please join the discussion at The ABA Blog <[blog.aba.org/2012/03/ietiquette.html](http://blog.aba.org/2012/03/ietiquette.html)>. *Ink on Bristol board by © Ray Nelson.*



was desperate to locate those Yellow Rails...

Nearly 80 years ago, the emerging technology of printed field guides changed “birdwatching”—birders began to look at illustrations in the field instead of identifying (dead) birds in the hand. Today only licensed bird banders or ornithologists with collecting permits experience that tactile dimension of birding.

Now we have the revolutionary technology of digital cameras, mp3 players, and electronic libraries. These devices are here to stay, so the time has come for the birding community to consider the impact of their use in light of the ABA Code of Birding Ethics <[tinyurl.com/mysgts](http://tinyurl.com/mysgts)>. This article looks at five topics: noise, community, posting, the field experience, and playback. To protect the innocent (and guilty), let’s dialog by exploring some iEtiquette scenarios.

## Define “Quiet”

*Nora always turns her phone to vibrate when she’s birding in the field. She carries her phone in her pocket so she is alerted of text messages or phone calls—in case a family member needs to reach her.*

*Ned’s concentration is disrupted whenever Nora’s phone vibrates: When it’s so quiet he can hear insects buzzing, the phone vibration is an audible interruption to his connection to nature. He wishes Nora would set the phone to airplane mode to prevent it from distracting her—and him.*

*Nigel was appalled at the cacophony of synthetic shutter noise during a recent visit to Hawk Ridge; cameras shotgunned every “good” raptor that soared by.*

Digital devices have insidious sound effects because sound travels much farther than we realize. Our ears are accustomed to so much ambient noise we may neglect to realize that a digital camera not set to silent is noisy. Or that an in-ear

headset used for study does not guarantee that the ringing song of a Louisiana Waterthrush is inaudible to others standing nearby.

According to Gordon Hempton, author of *One Square Inch of Silence*, the sci-fi ringtone on his iPhone is audible for three miles through quiet Olympic National Park. That distance can be reduced by choosing a sound with a sonic structure more similar to the natural ambience, such as a “crickets” ringtone.

We probably can agree that *all* digital devices should be set to mute in the field. If so, how far do we take the silent metaphor when it comes to talking, pishing, imitation, or playback?

## Birder ID

*Bryan thumb-types his sightings and notes in the field, failing to notice a passing birder on the trail.*

*Bob passes Bryan, thumbing away like a teenager needing a fix on his BlackBerry. He is offended by the antisocial behavior, so he purposely interrupts him: “Seen anything good?”*

*Brea would rather not interact with Bob or Bryan. She’s out to see birds, and will socialize safely and anonymously on the forums later.*

We cringe at the stereotype of a teen engrossed in thumb-typing without looking up and making eye contact. But Corey Finger of the “10,000 Birds” blog recently turned the tables when he challenged birders to push their social skills beyond “Seen anything good?” <[tinyurl.com/8ydbw5u](http://tinyurl.com/8ydbw5u)>.

Are we losing our civility and social skills—and perpetuating the birder stereotype—by bringing digital devices into the field? Or do forums allow us to thoughtfully connect with a much wider network of like-minded people?

Can we offset our digital footprint by being discreet iBirders, stashing the device, and looking up to say hello? Can we transform a forum of emails into a community of faces by introducing ourselves beyond “Bob” or “Mary”?

## Sharing the Excitement

*Ed’s lifers are few and far between these days, so his greatest joy is finding a good bird, immediately posting it to a listserv, and receiving e-mails from grateful beginner birders who quickly got to the site and saw a lifer.*

*Listserv posts and chasing grate on Ellen. What is the value of that Slaty-backed Gull sighting if it means you could drive a car to the reported location? For her, the latest trend of Google pushpins,*



No question about it, the proliferation of new apps presents birders with more information than ever before. But does that information make us better birders? Does it make us smarter and more knowledgeable? The verdict is still out on those questions.

*with detail down to the favorite perches of Northern Hawk Owls, has gone too far.*

*Enrique sees forums as an indispensable tool to understand the phenology of migration and to prepare for likely rarities, such as this past autumn’s influx of Ash-throated Flycatchers along the Atlantic Seaboard.*

It wasn’t long ago when we began to see posts sent from iPhones and BlackBerrys. Birders were actually looking at the Ruff when they sent the message! It was a miracle.

But the delay that naturally occurs when you call a friend to post for you, or when you drive home to log on, had some advantages. There was time to triple-ponder the identity of your sighting, to prepare comparison field mark notes, and to evaluate the ethics of a post. The filter of time is vanishing in the digital age.

And the network is much larger now. A phone tree required dialing. But a Whooping Crane internet post can go viral, like a Kevin Bacon three-degrees-of-separation game that instantly cascades to a universe of birders. For further perspective, see Paul Lehman’s commentary, “Birding and the Dark Side” (*Birding*, January/February 2008, pp. 36–40), and Rick Wright’s essay, “Birding Alone” (*Birding*, January/February 2008, pp. 42–47).

Have digital devices made it more imperative than ever to consider the ABA Code of Birding Ethics regarding public ac-



For decades, birders have resorted to every manner of trickery to catch a glimpse of the elusive **Yellow Rail**. A generation ago, birders who “needed” to “get” the Yellow Rail engaged in the highly controversial practices of flushing the birds by riding “rail buggies” and by dragging chains through marshes.

Today, Yellow Rails can be “gotten” by the less-dramatic method of playing easily downloaded recordings from widely available apps. Is the method any more or less ethical than the notorious rail buggies of yesteryear? How about just tapping together two quarters? The extensive and increasing use of apps invites new questions about birding ethics—and rekindles some old controversies. *Brazoria County, Texas; April 2009.* Photo by © Brian E. Small.

cess, habitat, and species before a post?

Is there value in slowing the rat race of internet chasing? Should we encourage alternative lists, such as “green” lists of carbon-free chases or “personally found” lists of species seen without posts, tips, or guides? Is a Cerulean Warbler by stake-out equivalent to a Cerulean Warbler you predicted correctly and discovered?

### Personal, Paper, Pixels?

*Patrick leaves his field guide in the car. He recalls that Pete Dunne once said “field time is for field study.” He notes as many field marks as possible and refers to the guide when he returns.*

*Pam has her Sibley, Peterson, and National Geographic field guides loaded on her Android. She finds it easier, lighter, and less disturbing to the bird to view the guides digitally rather than rifle around in her backpack to pull out a book.*

*Pernille eschews digital devices on her field trips, insisting that youth groups leave their cell phones at the trailhead. She views her guided walks as healing the “nature deficit” decried by Richard Louv’s book, Last Child in the Woods.*

*Paolo gives multimedia bird walks. He hands out loaner digital cameras to help children slow down and focus on the details of the natural world. His iPod library allows his older, hard-of-hearing participants to enjoy a bird song others can hear in the field. He displays field guide pages on his iPad, viewable in a group with its larger screen and wide viewing angle.*

*Phil uses his iPad as a digital field notebook and sketchpad. He loves his copious digital notes and sketches: Years later he can search a phrase such as “Hudsonian Godwit” and retrieve all his files with notes on that species.*

*Phoebe goes birding to get away from a society where televisions are mounted in supermarkets. She grimaces when she comes upon an iPad-thumbing birder sitting on the trail ahead of her. She thinks, “Why be outdoors to still be plugged in?”*

Do digital devices attract new birders or do they detract from the birding experience? In his role as Director of Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO), Pete Dunne has viewed this tension from both sides.

Dunne has noticed that an increasing number of visitors to CMBO are baby boomers brought into birding through photography. For them, digital devices have been the gateway to an interest in bird identification.

But what about, in Dunne’s words, “engaging with real birds in real time”? He recounts the story of a trip to Panama with a group of teens. Presented with a stunning scope-filling view of a Blue-crowned Motmot, two teens opted to look. The others pulled out their cell-phone cameras. If a look is worth a thousand words, then is a digital image for Facebook worth a million?

But it’s more than a debate over field guides vs. iPads or pencils vs. thumb-typing. Birders have different opinions about how to behave in the field. Any field guide or notebook—paper or digital—can be a distraction if eyes are looking down, rather than up, to glean more field marks from a Pectoral Sandpiper that could be a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.

In these times when technology interrupts our most private moments, we also have different feelings about gadgets—or any accoutrements—impinging on cherished field time. Despite ever-improving optics, many birders are enjoying “bare-naked birding”—observing and appreciating birds sans binocular, scope, or camera. See Ted Lee Eubanks’ blog post, “The Naked Hunch” <[tinyurl.com/7ykppj3](http://tinyurl.com/7ykppj3)>.

There is no question that digital cameras have played an exciting role in documenting first state records. Have digital cameras allowed you that valuable second study of your Nelson’s/Saltmarsh Sparrow sightings? Without a digital snapshot,

would the Gray-hooded Gull have passed unnoticed as one more Coney Island gull on the beach?

Or have we reached the point where a bird doesn't exist unless it is captured digitally? eBird now embeds photos with checklists so that reviewers can confirm sightings. Increasingly, photographic documentation is required by bird records committees for first state and provincial records. As birders, are we now *obligated* to carry a camera—in case we spot a wheatear or wagtail?

## The (AI)lure of Playback

*Lupe considers digital playback unethical and inconsiderate to others. Playback is lazy birding, rather than taking time to observe and wait—a slippery slope toward apps that identify birds' vocalizations or, in the future, binoculars that identify birds. She would like the ABA Code of Birding Ethics to ban all digital playback.*

*Lee considers himself an ethical playback user, relying first on imitation or pishing. He believes that playback has low impact when it allows him to see a bird without going off-trail. If he's traveled many miles to see a bird, the guarantee of a playback sighting offsets the carbon footprint of a second travel attempt.*

*Larry is a bird bander who uses recordings in his field studies, placing an iPod playing the call of an Eastern Screech-Owl near his passerine mist nets. He gets significantly higher catches, although sometimes this technique can bring in a few too many agitated birds to process quickly. But the goal is to band as many birds as possible, and he rationalizes that playback is less traumatic than handling, which is acceptable for science.*

Playback gets birders worked up more than a bunch of Chestnut-backed Chickadees with a Western Screech-Owl in the neighborhood.

Back when the equipment was bulky and expensive, group leaders were the purveyors of playback. Now anyone with a pocket-sized smartphone or mp3 player can get in on the action. And adding a \$15 mini-amplifier, to paraphrase a recent listserv discussion, lets one “really crank it up for owls and rails.”

The World Series of Birding at CMBO was one of the first entities to ban playback, motivated by the competitive problems of hearing others' playback. But what constitutes “playback”? Tapping two quarters together to lure a Yellow Rail? And what if another group hears it and believes they heard a rail?

Subsequent bans on playback were motivated by high-traffic areas with popular target species, such as Elegant Trogons at Cave Creek Canyon or Swainson's Warblers at the Great Dis-

mal Swamp. By reinterpreting existing statutes on disturbing animals and on noise disturbances, playback effectively could be prohibited on federal lands such as U.S. national wildlife refuges and national parks.

Donald Kroodsma, author of *The Singing Life of Birds*, points out that some studies have found that precise digital playback can leave birds in an altered physiological hormonal state lasting 24 hours. Pete Dunne is not surprised, given that digital playback is an accurate male territorial message saying, “I'm going to break down your front door, take your house, and steal your wife.” That seems stressful; but currently there is no scientific consensus on whether playback is detrimental.

If playback is banned, what about imitation? Or pishing? Or chumming for tubenoses with fish oil? All these human interventions have the same effect: They interrupt bird activity and draw the birds closer, causing them to expend unproductive energy.

Some birders are incredibly talented imitators, but are they fooling that Northern Pygmy-Owl? As sonograms illustrate, birds hear songs at a range and complexity that far surpasses the human ear. The most talented single-larynxed human is unlikely to meet the challenge, even for seemingly simple songs like those of a Varied Thrush. But is digital playback so precise that even a bird can't discern “Is it live or is it Memorex?”

And where does pishing fit in? Do birds react to pishing because they are curious to investigate a ruckus? Pishing may elevate a bird's anxiety level, but does it do so at a minimally acceptable level?

Now that perfectly accurate digital playback is so easy, so

**Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge**  
To protect wildlife and habitat and for Public safety,  
stay on trails and follow posted regulations.

Permitted	Prohibited
Hiking	Possession of Firearms or Other Weapons
Biking	Disturbing or Handling Wildlife
Wildlife Observation	Birdsong Playback
Wildlife Photography	Bank or Ditch Fishing
Pets on Leash	Horses and ATV's
Day Use - Sunrise to Sunset	

**Parking Ahead**  
For complete regulations, contact the Refuge headquarters at  
3100 Desert Rd, Suffolk, VA (757) 986-3705  
[www.fws.gov/northeast/greatdismalswamp](http://www.fws.gov/northeast/greatdismalswamp)

Sign of the times: no hunting, no fishing, and no iPods. Translated into practical birding terms, finding a Swainson's Warbler at southeastern Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge just got a lot tougher. Photo by © Kent Utley.

accessible—“too easy” or “too accessible”—should we default to no playback? As with innocent until proven guilty, should a birder’s ethical defense rely on an argument such as scientific study, equal accessibility, carbon footprint, tour group safety, or off-trail impact? Is it practical—or even desirable—to ask that we not use digital playback?

### **A Brave New World**

You may recognize yourself in some of these scenarios. Are you a Phil? Or a Nigel, Brea, Ellen, or Lee? I hope these scenarios will inspire both personal exploration and community dialogue on the ethics and etiquette of digital devices in the field. Please check out The ABA Blog <[blog.aba.org/2012/03/ietiquette.html](http://blog.aba.org/2012/03/ietiquette.html)> for online discussion of these topics.

The basic question is whether digital devices detract from or enhance a birding experience—for you and others—and how they impact birds.

The answer depends on what a “birding experience” means to you. Do you enjoy the thrill of twitching a new species? Is birding a time to commune with nature? Do you enjoy the beauty of birds through sketching, painting, or photography? Or the discovery of new locations? Or sighting a rarity on your own? Are you mentally stimulated by the finer points of identification? Do you most enjoy sharing your knowledge or sightings with others? Given that we are birders of many stripes and persuasions, there are no easy answers.

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