

Howard County Bird Club Rare Bird Policy Procedures

Is the bird on public property?

This is the easiest situation and the sighting can usually be broadcast to the entire birding community. Still, it is a good idea to include any restrictions of the property such as hours, parking, fees, etc.

If it is a rare or endangered bird, then a note about not using audio recordings or any other type of disturbance should be included.

Is the bird on private property?

It is usually a good idea to have a local coordinator. Facilitating access to a rarity on private property is an extremely delicate and stressful job. This topic will be raised annually in most states.

There have been references to guidelines mentioned, and we should start by pointing out that neither MOS nor any club has formal authority in such matters. Not only is it inappropriate to try to assume authority in matters of private property access, each situation is so different as to render application of strict guidelines nearly impossible.

The best anyone can do is to make some general recommendations.

Make contact with the property owner

I'm sure we'll agree that the well-being of the bird, the homeowners, and the neighbors are our greatest priorities.

- **Make contact** with the property owner and confirm the identification of the bird.
- **Communicate with the homeowners about what they're in for**, and see how much they're willing to go through for a bunch of crazy strangers who want to stand in their yard. Some homeowners for various valid reasons want a small number of visitors or even no visitors.

During the initial visit, good facilitators should do **all** of the following:

- Be pleasant and informative.
- Ensure the bird is documented with photo/video to establish the record.
- Bring up the subject of banding, explaining the huge benefits to science, but also ensuring they know there's a small chance the bird might depart after the banding.
- Prepare the homeowner for the level of interest and discuss options for how to control the flow of information.
- Look for logistical goldmines such as a **public** place to view the bird. Suggest possible options based on homeowner's interest.
- Suggest to the homeowner that they keep a sign-in log for the birders visiting their property.

Note: **I recommend trying to have one main facilitator** to avoid confusion and undue stress to the homeowners.

This is unofficial, of course, and the homeowners should do as they please. However, imagine what a mess it could be if you had competing forces disseminating information. One main POC is best for a variety of reasons.

Bad Options

- Post it immediately to the list-serve. *Risk*: The house is stormed and chaos ensues. The homeowners are overwhelmed. A fence is damaged. The police are telling people to move along. The birding community looks terrible and you are publicly castigated for your insensitivity to the community and the well-being of the bird.
- Keep it nearly entirely secret and arrange only enough access to photograph it once and band the bird. *Risk*: Personal, permanent animosity from birders who believe it was unreasonable not to try to help some people see the bird. After all, in most cases, SOME visitation is easily arranged. Many homeowners love sharing their visitor. Some have gone on to become active birders and members of their local bird club.

Don't do either of those.

There's a galaxy of compromises between those two bad options. Someone should go out there and feel it out. Keep in mind that any tiny step in one direction increases risk on the other end. The *more* people you tell, the higher the chance of disturbance. The *fewer* people you tell the more animosity from the community.

Better Options

So some sort of "Slow Release" process is what we usually settle on, often with much discussion with the homeowners. This is more manageable overall, and makes it easier to cut it off if there is disturbance to the homeowners, the neighbors, or the bird. The concept is that you tell an initial list and explain to them to tell a few people after they've seen the bird. In many cases, the bird sticks around and everyone who cares to see the bird hears about it over a week or two. It's a shame if the bird doesn't stick around long enough, but no one can predict how long it will stay, and there might be no way to increase the volume of visitors. You don't want to be the one who causes these nice people to be over-run.

So, the "Slow Release" process emerges, and it's probably the best thing we're going to get. You should start by getting some people over to get good photos and fully establish the ID, and the banders should be alerted as early as possible. Everything after this is a service you and the homeowners are doing for the birding community. By the way, the hummingbird banders here in Maryland are Bruce Peterjohn, David Holmes, and Joanna Lutmerding.

Who gets told beyond that is up to you, and this is where you won't win. I am 100% confident that there is no system that will satisfy even a narrow majority of people. It will also please approximately 0% of the people who don't get to see the bird. You might personally establish criteria based on being a photographer, being a local, making regular field birding contributions, membership on the records committee, being your friend, being a serious lister, or others.

Now that you have your hopeless subjective criteria, try making a list of people. If you are told to start slow (let's say 15-20 people) and let the word spread, even the people who didn't hear about it directly from the initial message might resent you. I typically get "why was I left off?" e-mails even from the people who heard about it word of mouth within 24 hours. (I tell them that's just how it has to work.) The best you can do is explain the situation, be sincere, and have thick skin. You're doing the best you can. I will say that the local bird club can be an invaluable teammate, and you might even choose to try to pass the facilitation to them. There are no golden rules, however, and saying that locals should ALWAYS control the situation is probably not correct. Many rare birds have been suppressed locally over the years, probably to greater detriment to science (i.e., documentation) and maximum possible access.

Does a casual local birder have more "right" to a bird than a passionate field birder who contributes 100s of eBird reports and extensive rarity documentation regularly? People will argue about these things forever, and this is the part that will not be solved to everyone's satisfaction.

Wrapping up

- Recognize the homeowners for being awesome with a print of the bird, MOS certificate, a field guide, or bird club membership.
- Submit details to the MD/DCRC and eBird. (eBird reports should be postponed until the bird is public knowledge.)

Inputting into eBird

Wait for at least seven days before entering your checklists into eBird. We didn't want this to appear on the eBird iGoogle Gadget or go out on the rare bird alerts, encouraging people to chase who weren't familiar with the privacy concerns.

Rare Bird policy procedures drafted by Joe Hanfman with input and text from Bill Hubick.
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