

The Do's and Don'ts of Nest Photography - It's All About Respect

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Important note - This article is not intended as encouragement for the novice to photograph birds at their nest, nor is it intended as a comprehensive "how to" on the subject. To undertake this activity, the photographer must be fully prepared and educated to do so in a responsible fashion that ensures the well being of the subjects!

Finally, spring has arrived over the Northern hemisphere and new life is abundant. Flowers are blooming, insects are buzzing and birds are preparing a safe home for their offspring. All this new life is a delight to photograph for the eager nature photographer. For many bird photographers, it's a dream come true to watch or even photograph a bird's nesting behaviour.

Last year I did some photography of Eiders and Eurasian Coots at their nests. But over the last few weeks, I have intensively followed two pairs of Great Crested Grebes (which is the largest and most common Grebe species in Europe) to record all aspects of their nesting behaviour. Although most reactions have been very enthusiastic about the photographs so far, I was quite surprised with the lack of ethical questions concerning nest photography.

Nest photography can provide many unique opportunities. It sure is tempting to try to get that great shot of a mother feeding her chicks or incubating eggs. However, you should always avoid disturbing your subject, even if this means you have to give up your dream and leave the birds alone. Disturbance could cause the parents to abandon the nest site or their newborn chicks. During spring, birds need their rest more than anything. Therefore, to photograph birds at their nest site without any disturbance, thorough preparation is required.

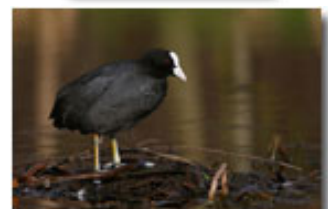
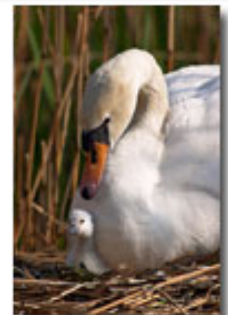
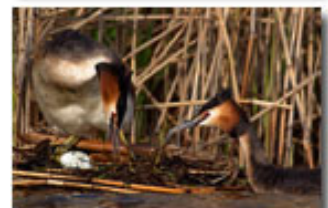
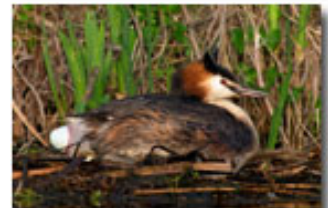
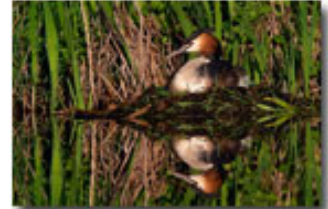
Know your subject...

It is particularly important that photography of birds at the nest should be undertaken only by those with a good knowledge of bird breeding behaviour. So, before approaching any nest site, study the adults and determine what their behaviour is in an undisturbed condition. Keep a safe distance from the nest and use binoculars for a close observation. The area where I live is known for its large numbers of Great Crested Grebes and because of that, I am quite familiar with the behaviour of this species.

Set up a hide when needed...

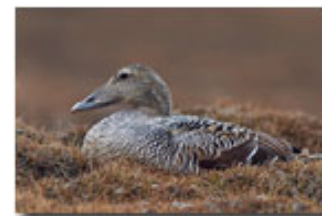
A hide should be used when there is a reasonable doubt that birds would continue their normal breeding behaviour. Hides should not be erected at a nest site where the attention of the public or any predator is likely to be attracted. When placing a hide at a location with common public access, the hide should never be left unattended as this would focus too much attention on the nest and cause disturbances. But, repetitive removal of the hide could also lead to disturbance and might cause the birds to abandon their nest site. Therefore, I would suggest choosing nest sites at places where birds are very tolerant of human presence, without the use of a hide. Also, when working in public places, try to work with the most obvious nest sites. This way people know what you are doing and this will decrease the chances for disturbance to both bird and photographer. Even better, setup a permanent hide at a place which has no common public access.

Species vary greatly in their tolerance of hides and the comings and goings of a photographer. Some species are notoriously vulnerable to desertion and should be left well alone. Use of a hide allows you to get close to animals but remember that there is a limit in how close you can get and that every single animal has his/her own tolerance zone.



Use your longest lens...

Although it's always refreshing to use new techniques and to play around with different angles and lenses, it is suggested to use your longest lens when it comes to nest photography. Keep your distance from the nest as large as possible to keep disturbance at a minimum.



Take your time...

One of the most important characteristics of a successful nature photographer is patience. Hiding and waiting until birds come closer is much better for the birds, and it leads to better photographs of the bird's natural behavior in an unthreatened state. There are many species which need at least a week's preparation of accepting the photographer's presence as he/she gradually move their set-up within range incrementally over that period of time; this should be seen as the norm. Each stage of preparation should be fully accepted by the bird (or both birds, if feeding or incubation is shared) before the next is initiated.

Things to make it easier...

While setting up your shoot, try to get at eyelevel with your subject. Since I'm working on Great Crested Grebes, this means getting just above the water surface. You can only take your photography to the next level when you can fully concentrate on your subject and your photography. This is only possible after good preparations, like proper clothing (waterproof clothing preferred) and camera equipment (angle finder, tripod, cable release). I started with my Grebe photography from the side of a ditch, but found myself shooting from an awkward position and decided to move into the ditch. After getting frozen feet the first time (wearing only sandals) and becoming fully saturated with water a couple of times after that, I decided to buy a neoprene wader. This led to a more comfortable shooting experience and allowed me to fully concentrate on the task at hand.

Final thoughts...

For me, being accepted by my subject is one of my prime motivations for nature photography. It is all about observing an animal that behaves naturally during my presence and being able to record that behaviour. You, as well as the animal, benefit from a careful, thoughtful approach. Disturbing a bird at its nest is unacceptable behaviour and therefore many wildlife photographer associations have banned nest photography. Check out your local wildlife photography association for restrictions regarding this.

With due diligence, photographing birds at their nest can be a most rewarding activity. However, the bottom line is to avoid nest photography unless you can be absolutely sure you're not causing harm to the parents or their chicks.

Editor's note - View more of Jasper's work in his [online portfolio](#) and on his website at www.doest-photography.com.

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