



WATCHING WILDLIFE BY BOAT

Introduction

Wild Scotland is the Scottish Wildlife and Nature Tourism Operators Association. We represent wildlife tourism companies across Scotland, all of whom are passionate about Scotland's wildlife. These guidelines provide advice on best practice for wildlife tourism companies whose aims are to provide an enjoyable and memorable wildlife-watching experience whilst minimising the impact on the nature and wildlife.

This document is part of the Wild Scotland Best Practice Guideline Series. More details about other guidelines in the series can be found at www.wild-scotland.co.uk.

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1. General

- Vessels are to comply with all MCA licence regulations and be clean and well-maintained.
- An appropriate Ship's Management Plan, Vessel Operating Procedure Document, Environmental Policy and vessel service records should be available for inspection by competent authorities.
- All relevant insurances, policy statements (e.g. Health and Safety, Child Protection) and staff disclosures and qualifications should be available for inspection by competent authorities.
- Where a vessel is operated single-handedly, particular care must be exercised in relation to the choice of route and conditions, as well as to safety should the skipper become incapacitated. Please note that under Marine Guidance Note (MGN) 280, the MCA does not recommend single-handed operations (Annexe 3, section 7.1) unless conditions laid out in the document are met.
- Be aware of local codes of conduct or sensitive areas and adjust your activities accordingly.
- Staff should be encouraged to gain appropriate professional qualifications, such as WISE accreditation.
- Guests should be reminded not to throw any litter over the side of the boat or to drop any onshore.
- Guests should be encouraged to provide feedback on their tour. Where possible, this should be recorded.
- You are encouraged to join the VisitScotland Wildlife Experience Quality Assurance Scheme
- You are encouraged to display your Wild Scotland sticker on your boat.





2. Responsible Professional Wildlife Watching

All vessels should operate to and be familiar with The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code. If operating on inland waters, reference to the Scottish Outdoor Access Code is also applicable. Each wildlife experience is different but to ensure best practice and a well-managed experience for customers, Wild Scotland recommends the following for additional consideration:

Wild Scotland recommends:

- Above all, you should set a good example. If you disturb wildlife, your guests and others watching you will think it is acceptable to do the same. If in doubt, back off (and explain your actions to your guests).
- Do not be tempted to get too close because your guests ask you too. The most genuine wildlife encounters are those where the animals are behaving naturally, so keep your distance.
- Any wildlife encounter should be on the animals' terms. Do not pursue an animal that continuously turns away from the boat.
- Generally, no more than 15 minutes should be spent with an animal, unless the animal is obviously associating with the boat and departure may cause disturbance.
- When several wildlife-watching vessels are in the vicinity of animals, establish contact with the other vessels and coordinate your actions to avoid disturbance. Consider limiting your time around an animal. Observe the points above.
- Animals should be approached cautiously at an oblique angle from behind. When you draw level maintain a steady parallel course to the animal or group of animals, at a distance that leaves them undisturbed. Never deliberately approach the animal head-on or directly from behind.
- Seal haul-out sites are particularly prone to disturbance. Sites should be approached at an oblique angle (not head-on) with constant watch of the animals for signs of disturbance. If individual animals are staring straight at the boat then you may well be disturbing them. Be prepared to move away smoothly, slowly and quietly.
- Do not form a barrier between an individual and a group and never split mother and calf pairs.
- If approached by marine mammals, and where it is safe to do so, put the engine in neutral and allow the animal to pass. Do not engage propellers until the animal(s) are observed at the surface and clear of the vessel.
- Should dolphins choose to bow-ride, maintain a steady course and speed. When you need to break off the encounter, slow gradually to a stop and allow the animals to leave you of their own accord. When the animals leave, do not follow.
- Wild Scotland does not encourage feeding, touching, riding or swimming with marine mammals or basking sharks.
- Do not deliberately identify nest sites of rare or protected species; avoid them if possible.
- If you are putting people ashore, choose your landing area carefully. Do not land guests near a seal haul-out site or breeding colony. Respect seabird breeding areas.
- Do not leave unaccompanied guests in sensitive areas where they may inadvertently cause disturbance.
- It is the responsibility of the skipper to move away if any signs of disturbance are observed.





- It is the responsibility of the skipper to be aware of codes for specific species and specific locations and to take advice on local issues.
- Where possible keep a log of wildlife sightings. Sightings of key or unusual species should be recorded and submitted to a recognised sightings database (see Wild Scotland website for further information).
- If you see anyone intentionally disturbing or harassing basking sharks or other marine wildlife, the incident should be reported to the local Police Wildlife Liaison Officer with details such as boat type and registration as well as any photos or video footage.

3. Good guiding and safety

- A brief and friendly introduction is a professional way to start a trip (see Box 1).
- Members of the crew should be introduced before departure and guests informed of their role.
- When speaking to the group, ensure that everyone can hear you. The best way to check is to ask. Remember to face the group not the object you are referring to.
- If using an amplifier, ensure the balance is suitable for all aboard (adjust to weather conditions).
- Encourage people to become involved with looking for species – it helps keep guests engaged during the trip.
- Carry extra pairs of binoculars to maximise the quality of experience for guests, particularly where it is necessary to stand off animals or birds that would be disturbed by a closer approach.
- When wildlife is spotted, ensure the guide/crew are positioned so that the guests can get the best possible view of the wildlife.
- When around wildlife, ask guests to keep noise and movement to a minimum to avoid disturbance.
- Guests should be told about, or have information available on the natural history and behaviour of species seen (see Box 2). It is not acceptable to merely point out species.
- If you are landing people as part of your trip, be careful where you put people ashore. Avoid close proximity to breeding colonies and stay with your guests in sensitive areas.
- Ensure that guests going ashore understand how to behave responsibly, such as keeping back from puffin burrows, not approaching seal pups etc.

BOX 1

Getting Things Off To A Good Start

Guests should feel welcome and involved in the trip. A briefing should be provided at the start of each trip. Key information may include:

- A welcome and introduction of the team;
- Safety instructions;
- Basic housekeeping (toilets, refreshments, where to put litter etc);
- Details of the trip and itinerary, including what wildlife may be seen during the trip (do not build up unreasonable expectations);
- Information about how the boat will be handled to minimise wildlife disturbance;
- Any other issues relevant to the trip relating to conservation, safety, behaviour, codes etc;
- The opportunity to ask questions.

BOX 2

Inspiring People to Find Out More

Where possible, have available:

- map of the area
- laminated species identification charts
- species charts in other languages
- field guides and other reference material
- binoculars
- Wild Scotland members' listing and other literature





4. The Law and Wildlife

It is your responsibility as a tour operator to be familiar with the law relating to wildlife. A summary of some of the key elements relating to marine wildlife law are shown below, but these are not exhaustive, both in terms of actions and species. Reference should always be made to the legislation itself.

It is an offence:

- to deliberately or recklessly capture, kill, injure or disturb any whale, dolphin, porpoise or basking shark;
- to damage or destroy a breeding site or resting place of any whale, dolphin, porpoise or basking shark
- to deliberately or recklessly harass any whale, dolphin, porpoise or basking shark;
- to take or keep any egg of a wild bird;
- to take, damage, destroy or otherwise interfere with any nest habitually used by any wild bird included in Schedule 1 of the 1981 Act as amended;
- to obstruct or prevent any wild bird from using its nest;
- to intentionally or recklessly harass any wild bird included in Schedule 1 of the 1981 Act;
- to take, damage or destroy or otherwise interfere with the nest or nest sites of birds included on schedule A1 of the 2004 Act (presently this only applies to the white-tailed sea eagle);
- to harass birds listed on schedule 1A of the 2004 Act (presently this only applies to the white-tailed sea eagle);

Specific laws also apply to seals and flora.

If you see anyone intentionally disturbing or harassing marine wildlife, the incident should be reported to the local Police Wildlife Liaison Officer with details such as boat type and registration as well as any photos or video footage.

For further information about wildlife and the law, refer to Scottish Natural Heritage at www.snh.org.uk/publications/on-line/wildlife/law (Note: the site currently being amended and only serves as an introduction. Any decision relating to wildlife law should be based upon appropriate advice).

5. Further Information

See the Wild Scotland website on www.wild-scotland.org.uk for current information

