

Wildlife Watching 101

The Scoop

For thousands of years humans have loved to be close to animals and it certainly is amazing if you are lucky enough to be able to see them in their natural habitat. However, it is important to remember that wild animals are simply that: wild. This means that respecting their habitat and keeping a safe distance is a must. Unfortunately, some people get so excited to get up close and personal with animals that they get too close. In some instances this can be extremely detrimental to the animals. Scared animals may leave the area, sometimes abandoning critical food sources or even their young. In some instances, endangered sea turtles who have been crowded on beaches have left without laying their eggs. It is our job to make sure that we share our Earth with animals in a respectful manner and let all animals have their space.



How You Can Help

If you are lucky enough to stumble across some amazing animals in their natural environment, be sure to follow these wildlife watching tips:

- Leave no trace. It's important to leave the environment as you found it or in a more pristine state than what you encounter. Be sure to dispose of your waste properly when out on a hike, exploring in a forest or walking along the beach. Better yet, lend a hand and pick up stray litter to help protect wildlife.
- Keep your distance. Always view wildlife from a safe distance of at least 100 yards. Do not disturb animals, approach or try to feed them. Wild animals can be unpredictable and protective of their young and shelter. Use binoculars to view wild animals without disrupting their natural way of life.



- If on the water, avoid excessive boat speed or abrupt changes in speed or direction. Stay fully clear of a dolphin's, whale's, or manatee's path. Endangered manatees have been sliced by propellers when boaters ignore speed limits. If approached by these animals, put the engine in neutral and allow them to pass.
- Stay away from wildlife that looks sick or injured. If you come across a sick or injured animal, do not try to help the animal yourself. Instead, call your local animal shelter or wildlife rescue and rehabilitation center and give them details about the animal. These trained professionals will be able to provide care in a safe setting to help the injured animal.

Another great way to keep yourself and animals out of harm's way is to know the laws that protect these animals. Many protected areas, like National Parks, have guidelines for how far to stay away from animals in order to avoid disrupting their natural behavior and to keep yourself safe. Make sure to know these guidelines and stick to them.

If you are lucky enough to encounter a wild marine mammal, like a sea lion or dolphin, make sure to keep a distance of at least 50 yards. The Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibits anyone from touching, harassing, or feeding wild marine mammals for their protection and for yours.

Photographing animals is a great hobby but make sure to invest in a zoom lens. Approaching animals to take selfies is simply not cool and can be very dangerous to you and the animals.

If you would like to see animals much closer, look for your nearest zoological or aquarium facility. It is the role of zoos and aquariums to allow people to experience these incredible animals and educate guests on the respectful ways to view them.

Sources:

"7 Ways to Safely Watch Wildlife." *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/7ways.htm.

Noaa. "Frequent Questions: Feeding or Harassing Marine Mammals in the Wild." *NOAA Fisheries*, 16 Sept. 2019, www.fisheries.noaa.gov/marine-life-distress/frequent-questions-feeding-or-harassing-marine-mammals-wild.



