

Bo Beolens - Birding For All

(Author, Columnist, Webmaster, Tour Leader, Travel Arranger and Birder)

bo@fatbirder.com

Size 6 Pink Stilletos

Different strokes for different folks.

Horses for courses.

Whatever floats your boat.

These should be the watchwords for birding tourism just as it should be for any provision for leisure or other social activity.

Throughout this address when I say provision I am including both physical facilities AND birding tour itineraries, as the lessons to be learned for one nearly always teach the other too.

We don't *all* wear size six pink stilletos, nor size ten hiking boots – the idea that we would is just plain daft, yet that is exactly what is often expected of travelling birders, just as it is also expected of visitors to many parks, preserves and nature reserves.

A quick aside about visitor facilities at reserves... all in the context of putting the needs of conservation first: Most providers have now recognised that disabled visitors have different needs... but, they haven't yet caught on to the notion of barrier free access... which, put simply, is that you don't need to make special provisions, but instead must remove unnecessary barriers. An example would be putting in a cattle grid rather than a gate if that gate is there to separate people/wildlife and stock. Nor have they yet cottoned on to the fact that the vast majority of disabled people are NOT wheelchair users. It's great that ramps replace steps and that hides/blinds have wheelchair knee room, but most people with mobility problems have trouble walking very far, especially without resting. Placing the simplest of benches every 150m is the single most effective mobility provision possible – and its one of the cheapest too!

The truth is that most reserve facilities, and most birding trips are designed by fit, young tall blokes... notwithstanding the handful of noble exceptions – there are a few smaller, older or female guides – those who design facilities and birding itineraries do so around their own preconceptions, skills, mobility, and, all too often, target species!

Frequently what is offered is inflexible, un-tailored and meets the needs of the provider more often than it does the end user.

Just as public provision at nature reserves tends to be designed for six-foot tall, fit young and healthy males, because most wardens and reserve managers are fit, tall blokes; so tours for birders tend to be rugged, rarity-chasing glimpses of the icons of the avian world.

Why?

Because tour leaders like it that way!

There are birders who want to be up at dawn, trekking through the bush in the heat of the day and staking out a little brown job until its head pops up for thirty seconds before disappearing for the duration. These people are catered for by one extreme of the birding tour spectrum...

The other end of present provision tends to be for birders who want to be up at dawn, trekking through the bush until the heat of the day forces them into the shade, all the while in pursuit of the highest numbers and greatest variety of birds with the scarcest being the most sought after.

In other words birding tours span the lexicon from A to D at best! E to Z might just as well stay at home.

At the other end of the skill set there are birders who have to be satisfied with being shown everyday birds by leaders who are only one page in front of them in the fieldguide.

I know this to be true as I have met and birded with both types.

I've been with guides who got annoyed because we didn't want to stop at their favourite teashop!

I've been with guides who have walked off for twenty minutes to see a bird only to announce that the group wouldn't be able to get down the path that they used.

I've been guided by people who ignore birds called out by the participants, and then 'find' the same bird ten minutes later and announce it to all to garner adoration from the novices being led. This is a case of a tour that caters almost exclusively for the ego of the tour guide.

Moreover, guides most often stick to a stakeout that has unsuitable access for many of us because they were too lazy to research accessible options.

There are plenty of unfit, elderly, young, females and disabled birders wanting to go on tours or day trips that cater for their specific needs. My contention is that there are enough to make it worthwhile for individual guides to adapt what they offer. Anyone taking this conceptual leap would help the industry grow and also encourage development of specialist niche guides and companies.

The following are not the Ten Commandments writ in stone. They are just some of the more obvious, but mostly ignored, points that the birding tour industry should be adapting to.

1. Grey Birds

Many birders take up birding in later life, or return to an old, half-forgotten hobby when they retire. Some of us may have been bird obsessed since the cradle, but the MAJORITY of birders didn't know an Eagle from an Emu until what hair they have had turned grey. The vast majority of US travelling birders are SKI'ers – Spending the Kinds Inheritance!

They cannot walk as fast, or as far or up the same slopes and slippery paths as they once could. Nor are they looking to find that missing Grassbird or Honeyeater that has eluded them for decades... they want variety.

2. Migrants

Overseas birders want different provision than do the home-bred variety. Its no good taking a European birder to the local poo ponds to see a Yellow Wagtail because its rare in NT... at home they have them coming out of there ears. Nor is it wise to assume that they are not interested in a Magpie or a Willy Wagtail just because they are everyday birds... they may be lifers to them.

3. Rest Days

Often tour guides around the world build in a bit of 'culture' or 'sight-seeing' that many birders couldn't give a figbird for, instead of building in some R&R with birds on the side. Hotels with nice grounds where you can sit and sip a cool beer while parakeets and fairy wrens, honeyeaters and woodswallows flit about are ideal. Aging birders and arthritics can take a 'day off' without having to miss out on what they want to see – BIRDS.

4. Test Before Believing

Hoteliers (and others) lie about accessibility and believe in miracles. I have lost track of the times I've been told that a hotel is 'wheelchair-friendly' only to find out that you cannot use the bathroom unless you can get out of your wheelchair and walk into the shower! In India we stayed in one hotel where the dining room was one level up and there were no lifts! In Delhi airport the 'gents' disabled lavatory is up a narrow flight of ten steps! Many wheelchair users have NO USE OF THEIR LEGS so cannot stand, let alone walk.

Another aside here about assessment for disability access.

Its not rocket surgery! Get a plastic stacking chair. Sit on it. Stick your elbows out and shuffle forward. Can you get through a door without drawing in your arms? Then a wheelchair can pass through.

Now move around the hotel room, can you get alongside the bed?

NEVER lift your backside off the seat.

Can you reach light switches, wardrobe rails, or the spare toilet rolls?

Can you see in mirrors and get close enough to use a wash basin?

Can you get into the bathroom and shut the door?

Can you get into the shower without lifting the chair legs?

You now know whether the room will work for a wheelchair user.

If there is room in your vehicle put a plastic garden chair on board... this will make a lot of otherwise unusable showers, useable.

5. Space Travellers

Disabled travellers need more space! This is a real biggie... its no use providing an 'accessible' vehicle and expecting a dozen birders to get into a 14-seater. I always allow at least 2 seats per person. This makes it roomy for people like me that have a bent back and a fat front, and it also means that there will be room for a wheelchair or two as well as everyone's luggage.

6. Time Management

Many people with disabilities need more time for domestic arrangements. Dressing, washing and using the toilet take up more time if you have to keep transferring in and out of a wheelchair or have stiff or weak limbs. A 5.30am start for you may mean taking your shower before bed and setting the alarm for 5.15am... Your customers might have to set theirs for 4.00am!

7. Eat In

Book hotels that have their own restaurant or dining room. Many disabilities and infirmities do not just make for mobility problems... many are accompanied by fatigue. If you finish the day's birding at 5.00pm and are to eat at 7.00pm at a restaurant off site it not only means no resting, but it also means having to wait until everyone has finished eating, drinking and chatting before heading back to the hotel. If you eat in, and eat early people can go to their room and collapse – which is what I have to do.

And spell this out if you have a mixed group because otherwise everyone just assumes that some people are being anti-social whereas they are, in fact, shattered.

8. Planning

Do your homework for accessible bird locations. I recently was talking to a guide from Sri Lanka telling him how we had missed out on a number of endemics because my wife refused to stay in a spider infested shack without electricity or hot water, and neither of us could manage to climb a steep rocky path or use the offered doorless Jeep with no seatbelts. His response was that he had several sites for all the endemic birds!

I am shocked too by the fact that most birders carry telescopes but still 'need' to get within a few feet of a bird! That's what optics are for... helping you get a closer view, without being as physically close.

You also need to do your homework on your clients needs. Ask a group if they can all managed 500 meters on the flat and they will probably tell you they can. Ask them privately as individuals and some will tell you that 150 meters is there absolute limit. Get to know how far 100 meters is too, as 90% of people wildly under or over estimate distance.

I tried this out once and measured the distance from a road to a hide – exactly 200 meters. When I asked people how far it was estimates varied from 50 meters to 350!

9. Mobile Hides

Vehicles are mobile hides. I have experienced birders shaking their heads and muttering about my laziness when they see me driving my car down a drivable track and then sit watching birds from within it. Meanwhile they have walked along a riverbank breaking the skyline and then banged about as if wanting to wake the dead. (Fieldcraft seems to be a thing of the past) However, driving a vehicle at the same space as that of the local ruminants, rarely disturbs birds.

10. Go Slow

One of the biggest frustrations I've found is not being quick enough to cover the ground that is between me and the spot where one can see a bird that someone else has spotted. There is a solution to this... make sure EVERYONE moves at the pace of the slowest participant.

Get everyone in place before starting to bird. Sometimes settling down and quietly waiting will turn up more birds than charging off into the bush. Moreover, if birding a road or drivable track on foot someone should be driving the vehicle FREQUENTLY moving it to be near the birders. It happens I often use a vehicle to lean on when birding or even sitting on a running board in order to be able to peer into the canopy.

Furthermore, put a couple of cheap folding chairs on board... many people cannot keep binoculars steady when standing, as well as not being able to tip back to look up, having a seat makes birding much easier. If appropriate, out of breeding season, use taped calls to bring birds closer when everyone is ready to see them.

My top tip is to remember that most people with mobility issues are 'hard of walking' rather than unable to walk at all... and its not about steep gradient or how solid surfaces are, but about the distance they can manage before they are too stiff, or in too much pain to continue. Bear in mind that walking one hundred yards one way usually means walking another one hundred yards back again!

Conclusion

To sum up...

Is there 'Birding For All'?

Sadly, the answer has to be - not yet!

However, sooner or later entrepreneurs will wise up to the fact that there are millions of assorted birders with dozens of different needs all waiting to be their clients!

In hard financial times tour leaders cannot afford to cherry-pick their clients to fit the tour leaders desires or birding 'needs' and need to adapt what they do, and where and how they do it offer their service to the widest customer base.

Want to know more about mobility and birding? See www.birdingforall.com

Want to know more about birding everywhere? See www.fatbirder.com

Want to hear more about this birders views? See www.grumpyoldbirder.com

Need help tailoring your service to the widest customer base? See www.redstartconsultancy.com