

Attracting Birds Using Tapes or Compact Discs

by Noel J. Cutright

Most of us, at one time or another, have probably used a recorded bird song in an attempt to draw a bird closer for a better look. We all know that recordings should be used with care, but it is not always clear when it is okay to use a recording and when it is not. What is your response to each of the following hypothetical situations?

1. Badger Birder is participating on a Christmas Count. She has been told that playing an Eastern Screech-Owl recording in appropriate habitat should elicit responses from Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Downy Woodpeckers, Dark-eyed Juncos, and several other winter species. Birds that hear the tape will fly closer and a more robust count of the number of individuals can be obtained, and maybe one of the more uncommon species might fly in to check out all the commotion and be counted. Should Badger play the screech-owl tape (Christmas Count rules do not specifically address tape use)? Should a different decision be made late in the day or during very cold weather? Is

“pishing” any more or less acceptable than using a taped call?

2. Badger is leading an early June bird hike with 20 participants. In the rich deciduous woodland ahead, which is not routinely visited by birders, he can hear a Cerulean Warbler singing high in the treetops and a Hooded Warbler from a brushy gap left when a couple of large oaks were toppled by a storm. All of the participants can hear both species, but several express an interest in also seeing both birds. Badger knows that playing a tape of the songs of both species will likely cause these territorial males to fly closer to the group to investigate the source of the song. Should Badger play short bursts of the songs so everyone can see the birds? Two observers have trouble finding the birds among the leaves, and because neither has seen these species previously, they persist in asking him to replay the tapes. Should Badger acquiesce or politely decline and explain that he is reluctant to further disturb these uncommon Wisconsin species during the breeding season?

3. Badger is working on her Breeding Bird Atlas priority block and hears

a song that she believes is a Connecticut Warbler. After searching the thicket for 30 minutes, she still hasn't glimpsed the bird. Should Badger play the song of a Connecticut to bring it closer and confirm her identification? Would your response be different if a more common species was inserted for the Connecticut in this scenario?

4. Badger has heard that playing the tapes of the various rail songs will elicit a response from them if they are present in the marshes near where he lives. After he hears a Sora respond on his first attempt, he decides to visit the area frequently during May and June to learn more about rail usage of this wetland. Should Badger use a tape on every visit? How many repetitions should he make before he is either satisfied or gives up on a particular evening? Would your answer be different if Badger was a trained scientist gathering data on rail populations for conservation purposes?

5. Badger is told by a non-birding friend that a Yellow-breasted Chat was seen the previous day in a large clump of brambles at a nearby state wildlife area. She visits the area on two consecutive days without sighting the bird. On the third day, she plays the song of a chat and the bird immediately calls and sings from the thick cover and makes a brief appearance. Badger knows that chats are uncommon and that some birders will drive considerable distances to add the bird to their annual tally. Badger also knows that many of these birders will likely use their own tapes to increase their chances of seeing the bird. Should Badger report the bird to the state hotline, tell only a few close friends, or keep the information to herself? Would your response be different if

the species was the state-endangered Yellow-throated Warbler or state-threatened Bell's Vireo? Would your response be different if another chat location was already known in the state and this was not the only site where they could be found?

6. Badger is participating with 10 other birders on an early June field trip. The trip is a productive one, and he is enjoying the birds and other birders. However, one birder seems to want to impress the others with how quickly he can find the song of a particular species on his new CD, and then plays the song incessantly while trying to draw the bird closer. Should Badger say something in an attempt to modify this bothersome behavior, or keep his mouth shut and enjoy the good looks at a couple of species he has seldom observed?

There is no single answer that is correct for every birder in all of these situations. However, the WSO has adopted a formal code of ethics that provides guidance on what constitutes acceptable behavior. The very first guideline states that "when birding, we should act in ways that do not endanger the welfare of birds and other wildlife." It further cautions us to "use recordings and similar methods of attracting birds sparingly, especially in heavily birded areas or known locations of individual birds."

Instances where excessive tape playing causes problems are not often recounted in print, but are circulated by word of mouth. It seems the effects of tape playing need considerable study as the number of birders continues to grow.

In the July 1997 issue of *Winging It*, the newsletter of the American Birding Association (ABA), the case of a Fan-

tailed Warbler that appeared at Arizona's famous Patagonia Roadside Rest is discussed. This note suggested that "the smattering of overly enthusiastic birders who pushed the bird with zealous tape-playing and too-close approaches were responsible for its presumed departure after just a few days." A birding tour leader recently told me that the Elegant Trogon is becoming more and more difficult to see in southeastern Arizona because of disturbances of their nest sites by enthusiastic birders and photographers.

It seems that organizations are discouraging tape playing more and more, especially for rails and owls in their breeding season, and this activity actually has been banned in Texas State Parks. You may think, "If I only play the tape for a little while, it won't hurt." But what if over 20 people played tapes for "just a little while" over a one-month period during the breeding season? Might not this severely disrupt any species' nesting?

Everyone who enjoys birds and birding has an obligation, at all times, to respect wildlife. As stated by the ABA as one of their principles of birding ethics, "In any conflict of interest between birds and birders, the welfare of the birds and their environment comes first."

You also may be wondering about using "pishing" or squeaking to attract birds. Intelligently and gently applied, these methods result in virtually no disadvantage to the bird being attracted. However, even this can be overdone for any one particular bird. Overexposure probably only serves to make

the bird blasé and immune to further entreaties. Recordings of songs are more easily abused, particularly in the case of breeding birds.

The WSO does not intend to call for a ban on the use of recorded songs, but harassment of birds cannot be tolerated. For purposes of the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA), "harassment" constitutes an intentional or negligent act or omission that creates the likelihood of injury to wildlife by causing annoyance to an extent that significantly disrupts normal behavioral patterns that include, but are not limited to, breeding, feeding, or sheltering. Under Section 9 of the ESA, it is harassment, and therefore unlawful, to play a tape to attract a known Kirtland's Warbler. This carries over even to following years, so playing a tape at a site where a Kirtland's was found the previous year is also not allowed.

Our interactions with birds are a continuum, and the point at which we cross the harassment border is subtle and may be even more obvious to a bystander than to the birder. I have faith in the birders of Wisconsin to recognize most unacceptable birding behavior, and if you are being made uncomfortable by the actions of another birder, don't hesitate to voice your opinion. Use your common sense and be patient. If you are in doubt, give the bird the benefit of that doubt.

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