

Sibley Guidelines

What *Not* to do

Under no circumstances should you play a recording continuously or at very high volume. The epitome of bad playback etiquette is the birder who walks around with a device continuously and loudly broadcasting sound, or the photographer who sets up a device on continuous playback and waits for the bird to fly in. This is ineffective, unnecessary, and is the kind of playback most likely to be harmful to birds and disturbing to other birders.

A note on volume: I have found that the built-in speaker on the iPhone 3G is adequate for every playback situation I have tried, even though it is not as loud as an actual bird. If you are using a device with a built-in speaker, there is probably no need for an added, powered speaker. Whatever device you are using, your starting volume should be *lower* than the sound you imagine the bird would produce.

Respect for the birds

To be really effective, playback requires just as much care and “field-craft” as any other birding technique. You need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the habits and behavior of the bird you are trying to lure.

Plan carefully and understand your quarry so that you can guess where the bird is, or where it is likely to be. If you have already heard it or seen it, consider those locations when deciding where to play audio. You must be in (or very near) the bird’s territory to get a useful response.

Choose your spot and set the stage – Visualize the scenario of the bird coming into view. How will it approach the recording, and where will it sit so that you can see it? You should play the recording from a location that offers the bird a comfortable approach through its preferred habitat, and also has openings, edges, and/or prominent perches where it will come into view. Many playback efforts are unsuccessful either because the bird will not cross unsuitable habitat, or because dense vegetation allows it to approach closely while remaining hidden.

Begin by playing the recording quietly for just a few seconds – for example just two or three songs, then stop, watch, and listen.

Use short snippets – If there is any response, try very short snippets of song after that, even stopping the recording after half of a normal song, to try to tease the bird into the open without posing a serious challenge to its self-esteem.

Watch for a response – If there is no obvious response after 30-60 seconds, play another 15-30 seconds of sound. Remember that the bird may respond by approaching silently, or by guarding its mate, so a lack of song is not necessarily a lack of response, and you can assume that you are being watched. Watch the vegetation carefully on all sides for an approach, and also watch and listen for a response from neighboring males.

Remain calm – If you still don't detect any response, play the recording again, watch and wait, and repeat. But don't keep this up longer than about five minutes, and resist the urge to finish with a prolonged, loud barrage of song.

Check back later – Many birds will remain silent in the immediate aftermath of the playback, and then begin singing vigorously minutes later. Males in other territories might monitor the playback, and the challenge to their neighbor, and also be stimulated to sing minutes later. If you can wait around, or circle back to check on the area after 10 to 30 minutes, you may find that the desired response to playback is occurring then.

Respect for fellow birders

Be courteous – Before starting, ask your fellow birders if anyone objects to using playback.

Don't surprise people – Before each burst of playback, announce to the group that you are about to start playback (just quietly saying “playback” will do), and hold the device up above your head during playback so other birders can see at a glance the source of the sound.

Be unobtrusive – Keep the volume low and play only short clips of sound – 30 seconds or less – then pause to watch and listen for a response.

ABA Guidelines

Promote the welfare of birds and their environment.

1(a) Support the protection of important bird habitat.

1(b) To avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming.

Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas, or for attracting any species that is Threatened, Endangered, or of Special Concern, or is rare in your local area;

Keep well back from nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display areas, and important feeding sites. In such sensitive areas, if there is a need for extended observation, photography, filming, or recording, try to use a blind or hide, and take advantage of natural cover.

Use artificial light sparingly for filming or photography, especially for close-ups.