

‘You could single-handedly push it to extinction’: how social media is putting our rarest wildlife at risk

From breeding spots overrun by visitors to photographers disturbing endangered species, experts say the rarer the find is, the bigger the problem

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While many birders are respectful, even slight disruption during breeding season can make the difference between birds breeding or not. Photograph: Steve Young/Alamy

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ith its impressive size, striking plumage and rowdy displays, sighting a capercaillie is many birders' dream. Only about 530 of the large woodland grouse survive in the wild, most in Scotland's Cairngorms national park.

But in recent years, those tasked with saving the species from extinction have had to walk a line between calling attention to the birds' plight and discouraging people from seeking them out.

Although it is illegal to disturb capercaillie during the breeding season from March to August, that hasn't deterred birders and nature photographers, motivated by the possibility of a prestigious spot – or shot. Over the 2022 season, 17 people were found on or around the “lek”, where male birds gather to compete for the attention of females in spring, says Carolyn Robertson, the project manager of the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project.

That same year, a birdwatcher was caught on camera, flushing six capercaillie from the breeding site. The man was arrested, but let go with a verbal warning. By then the damage may have already been done.

Even fleeting disruption can “make the difference between birds breeding, or not,” says Robertson. “We know that it increases their stress levels, so there's a high chance they didn't come back to the area to breed that morning; they might not have returned for days.”



A male capercaillie displaying in a forest in Scotland, March 2012. Experts are asking people to 'leave the birds in peace' after an excess of visitors. Photograph: Nature Picture Library/Alamy

With so few birds remaining in the wild, human disturbance could be “catastrophic” for the species, Robertson says – but discouraging nature enthusiasts from seeking them out has proved challenging. “When people have taken photographs of capercaillie and put them online, they’ve been liked thousands of times. By the time we ask them to take them down, it’s got them so much kudos, they don’t want to do so.”

It reflects a new and increasing threat to vulnerable species and habitats around the world: social media. A new paper [in the Science of The Total Environment journal](#) has highlighted the negative impacts of online posting and photography on biodiversity.



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By calling attention to rare flora and fauna – and in some cases their precise locations – nature enthusiasts posting about finds can cause others to flock to the same location, and even to deploy unethical tactics (such as playing back bird calls or using bait) to secure a sighting for themselves.

Robert Davis, a senior lecturer in wildlife ecology at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia and the paper’s lead author, says the research was “driven by collective rage” at having seen pristine natural spots and vulnerable species negatively affected by visitors.

“There’s actually probably never been a time in human history where you can share information so rapidly to so many people, and with that has come this immense pressure to systems,” he says.

Populations of the critically endangered blue-crowned laughingthrush, restricted to a small area of Jiangxi province in China, are believed to have changed their nesting habits in response to “severe” disturbance from wildlife photographers.



Enthusiasts gather to photograph an endangered scarlet ibis in a wetland in Nanning, Guangxi province, China, November 2023. Photograph: NurPhoto/Getty Images

In 2022, packs of photographers turned up in Shetland, seeking a sight of the elusive lanceolated warbler, potentially causing the bird to abandon the area. This August, a photographer was fined more than £1,600 for disturbing a nesting European honey buzzard in Wales.

It’s a really tight balance to walk: social media is great for drawing people’s attention, but there needs to be discretion
James Lowen

In Perth, where Davis lives with his wife, Belinda, a biologist and co-author of the paper, online attention has proved especially problematic for the state’s

endemic orchids. “You can track it on social media, more and more pictures being put up of the same plant,” he says.

Sometimes, one post about a flowering orchid can result in hundreds of visitors to the site, Davis says, putting the plants at risk of being damaged or poached.

The eastern Queen of Sheba orchid, which can take 10 years to bloom and is found only in a small area of south-west Western Australia, is such a desirable find for orchid hunters that plants in the wild have had to be put under protection.

“They’ve had to fence that orchid, put cameras on it and have guardians for it,” says Davis. “That really exemplifies the extreme end.”

But asking people not to seek out and post about vulnerable species is often met with resistance, says Davis. “You get a lot of pushback from people saying: ‘Why are you the gatekeeper? Everyone has a right to see this – what’s the harm in just one person?’.”

“When something’s that rare, you could single-handedly push it to extinction.”



A sign warns visitors to stay clear of a nesting area in Thornham, Norfolk, England. Photograph: David Tipling/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

He acknowledges that the impact on vulnerable species is minor relative to the broader threats posed by habitat loss and invasive species. But social media perpetuates the problem, Davis says. “Ultimately, it fuels demand: the rarer something is, the more people want to see it.”

It highlights a mounting conflict between conservation aims, and those invested in seeing a species before it's too late.

James Lowen, a natural history writer based in Norfolk, says standards among nature enthusiasts have been slipping, perhaps reflecting the ease of taking and sharing photographs online.

“There are now more people whose hobby is wildlife photography, rather than wildlife watching, and I suspect that they have not been brought up with the same attention to ethics and fieldcraft.”

That threat is having to be actively managed now, among countless others. The recent rediscoveries of the Norfolk snout moth, believed to be extinct, and the ghost orchid, not seen since 2009, generated much excitement from enthusiasts – but their precise locations have had to be obscured, for fear of further disadvantaging the species, says Lowen.

“It's a really tight balance to walk: social media is great for drawing people's attention, but there needs to be a level of discretion.”

Lowen himself removed capercaillie from the most recent edition of his book, *52 Wild Weekends*, to reflect the impact of human disturbance on their breeding success. “We all want to see capercaillie, and to see them display – they are remarkable creatures ... but absolutely, birders should stay away.”



In 2008, a white-crowned sparrow, native to North America and rarely seen in Europe, drew crowds of birdwatchers to a garden in Cley, North Norfolk. Photograph: David Tipling/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

The Cairngorms Capercaillie Project, meanwhile, has sought to harness the power of social media to save the species. Last year, it launched the “Lek It Be” campaign, urging people not to go looking for the bird or to post photographs online.

Robertson says it has already had a positive effect, with 55% fewer birders, photographers and guided groups observed around lek sites this season.

While the bird-watching community has backed the campaign, photographers have been less responsive, Robertson says – perhaps reflecting their different motivations. “Birders will talk about it, and tick a list ... but [photographers] need that output, the shot – that’s what they’re there for,” she says.

Now the worst offenders may find themselves on the other end of the lens. Last year, the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project posted a video of two men caught looking for capercaillie on the lek, to discourage others from doing the same. The intent wasn’t to publicly shame them, Robertson says. “It’s about developing a social norm. We just don’t look for capercaillie any more – we leave them in peace.”