

Birding's red zone falls between two lines. One marks the distance from a bird at which a visual identification, with the optics at hand, is possible.

A.K.A.: Close enough.

The other is the point at which a bird grows discomfited by your proximity and flies away.

A.K.A.: The flush point or flush distance.

When the former is reached before the latter, birders say: "Ahhhh."

When the latter precedes the former, birders say....

Well, let's leave that unsaid.

Getting close enough to a bird to identify it is pretty much the whole game, and this is why I am often surprised at how clumsy many birders are in their efforts to approach birds without flushing them. Hunters call this stalking. Here are a few tips that will improve your stalking skills and help close the distance.

First, realize that you are being watched. Birds that are oblivious to their surroundings don't last long. If you can see a bird, it can be counted on to be watching you. Act accordingly.

Avoid sudden or abrupt movements. Birds react more quickly to movement than to sound. A rapid movement may seem threatening, and when threatened, birds commonly seek some corner of the planet that is less threatening.

Approach slowly and, if possible, obliquely. An approach that appears to skirt or go wide of a bird is less threatening than one in which an interception seems inevitable. Move slowly. Pause frequently. Let the bird grow used to your presence and....

Watch the birdie! Birds signal their nervousness in many ways. Freezing, crouching, turning into the wind, raising their wings, bobbing their heads, calling. If you note any of these behavioral signals, stop. Wait for the bird to calm down and adjust to your presence. You have just reached the bird's flush distance, and with a little patience you might be able to push your luck (and the bird's tolerance) a little further.

You will have better luck if you approach a bird from downwind (i.e., with the wind blowing in your face). If you approach from upwind, birds flush sooner, because you appear to be cutting off their avenue of escape (birds, like aircraft, tend to take off into the wind) and also because when they take off they will necessarily, if only momentarily, be closer to you.

Something they don't want.

If a bird is feeding in a certain direction, consider moving ahead of it. Let the bird approach you. I just got back from a trip to Bylot Island, Nunavut. I used this strategy on a Common Ringed Plover feeding along a small tidal pond, and was treated to views of this rare North American breeder that breached the close-focus capacity of my Leica 7x42s.

Also, in your approach, avoid getting too close to other birds. If you flush a Black-bellied Plover en route to your possible Roseate Tern, you may discover only that terns, in general, are susceptible to suggestion.

Finally, know when to say when. There is no rule that says birds must be approached to their flush distance. If you are happy with a satisfying view, don't push the bird for a great view. The next birder on the scene will thank you.

Did You Know?

BY JEFF WELLS

We birders love facts and we love surprises. Just consider the number of new bird books that appear every year and the excitement a subject heading like "Ross's Gull" can have on an email list.

The number of Passenger Pigeons that once graced the North American continent was estimated at 3-5 billion birds. The Passenger Pigeon became extinct in 1914, only about 50 years after being described as abundant. Its decline was the result of exploitation for public markets—hundreds of thousands of birds were harvested at nesting colonies and shipped by railroad to large eastern cities. This, coupled with the deforestation of the eastern U.S. in the late nineteenth century, left the birds with fewer locations at which large colonies could breed, thus dooming the species.

Today, 3-5 billion birds—of 300 species, not just one—are estimated to migrate south from the boreal forest region of Canada and



Canada Warbler. Photo © John Kormendy, Boreal Songbird Initiative.

Alaska every fall. The birds spilling through backyards, parks, and forests throughout the U.S. are here thanks to the fact that their breeding area—the 1.5 billion acres of boreal forest—remains one of the world's largest unfragmented and unindustrialized forests.

Unfortunately, that forest, like the forests that once supported immense colonies of Passenger Pigeons, is now being cut at a rate of 2-3 million acres per year. But there is good news, too. The province of Quebec recently announced the establishment of more than 3 million acres of new protected areas, and in 2001 Peru announced the creation of the 5.1-million-acre Cordillera Azul National Park within the wintering range of a major boreal breeder, the Canada Warbler.

Jeff Wells is the author of *Birder's Conservation Handbook: 100 North American Birds at Risk* (Princeton University Press, 2007).