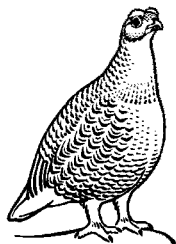


# British Birds

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## Editorial

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### Codes for rarity-finders and twitchers

**T**ravelling to see a rare bird—twitching as it is now widely known—has become an increasingly popular pursuit during the last decade. A nationwide telephone grapevine can spread the news of a rarity within hours. If the species is one which few observers have seen in Britain, as many as a thousand or more may visit the site within a matter of days. Even a lesser rarity, such as a Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* or an Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*, may attract a hundred or more, especially if it occurs in a 'quiet' period for rarities, or in a popular birdwatching area.

The growth of twitching has forced improving organisation and a more responsible approach among its participants, with the result that, in the last year or two, the number of instances of significant disturbance or harm to bird, habitat or people at rare-bird venues has been relatively very small. During 1981, one highly publicised exception involved the River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* at Roydon, Norfolk. During the few days of its stay, over 1,000 observers visited the site (which was on a public footpath), some of whom—in their efforts to see, film or photograph the bird, or trap it for ringing—trampled an area of rye, variously estimated between 200 and 400 square metres. Five nests of Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* and Grey Partridges *Perdix perdix* in the hedge bordering the footpath were deserted. While it is important to view this damage in perspective (the value of the lost crop was less than £10, the trampled area constituted 0.2% of the field, and approximately a 15 times greater area had been lost to damage by rabbits), those who argue that it was tolerable considering the circumstances miss the point of the concern over this or similar 'minor' damage or misbehaviour. News of such happenings spreads quickly within the local community or more widely (through national press and television in this case), giving all birdwatchers a tarnished reputation and indirectly inhibiting public support for bird conservation efforts. Perhaps of more direct

concern to twitchers themselves should be the fact that such stories (regrettably sometimes in exaggerated form) quickly circulate among bird-watchers, making them understandably disinclined to divulge their own rarity finds for fear of similar incidents in their own regular birdwatching haunts.

We are grateful to Major W. P. Riley, on whose land the River Warbler occurred, for his understanding and constructive discussion of the situation. His main concern was that he was not informed of the bird's presence at the outset, or forewarned of the impending invasion of the area by birdwatchers. We are particularly persuaded to his view that a collection of money to compensate for cases of damage could be counter-productive, in that it may encourage an irresponsible approach by birdwatchers. In some cases, however, a collection may be appropriate when no damage or inconvenience has been caused, to provide a tangible form of gratitude for any special arrangements or considerations which have been made, or, especially, as an entrance fee to view a rarity on a reserve. If circumstances make viewing possible and allow for the necessary arrangements to be made, there is a fund-raising opportunity for the organisation running the reserve, which could be considerable if a major rarity is involved.

With hindsight, the problems at the River Warbler site could have been avoided, either by not spreading the news at all, or by making special prior arrangements with Major Riley. In the event (and it seemed a perfectly plausible plan at the time), it was decided to regulate the flow of observers by spreading the news slowly and selectively, but—perhaps inevitably—it eventually reached the national grapevine through the indiscretion of only one confidant. Clearly, this approach to spreading the news of a rarity in a sensitive site is risky, and is not recommended for similar situations in the future.

The welfare of the bird should always be the prime consideration of both finder and twitcher. It is sensible for a lone observer to attempt to obtain confirmation of his sighting by another, well-known and competent ornithologist. Drawing on the lessons learned at Roydon and at other rare bird sites, we have compiled the following guidelines concerning what to do when a rare bird is found, or when visiting the site.

### **Code for rarity-finders:**

1. *The finder should feel no obligation to spread the news of a rarity, whatever the circumstances.*
2. *Even if inclined to tell others, the finder should first assess the likely number of interested observers, and consider whether the site can cope—without risk of trespass, disturbance or harm to bird, habitat or people's privacy—with such an influx.*
3. *The landowner, tenant farmer, local people or other birdwatchers should be consulted as appropriate. (An explanation of the situation will often prompt an interested and helpful reaction, and allay the understandable concern which may be caused by an unexplained invasion of the area. If highway obstruction is a potential problem, the police may welcome prior warning. On a reserve, the warden should always be among the first to be told.)*

4. *News should not be spread until appropriate arrangements have been made; these may include special wardening, roping-off the viewing site, posting of advisory or directional signs, and arrangements for car parking.*
5. *Once the decision has been made to spread the news, and preparations made, the message should contain clear instructions concerning how to reach the site and any special arrangements which have been made.*

**Code for twitchers:**

1. *If you are among the first to hear of a rare bird, satisfy yourself that the site can cope with the likely influx of observers before spreading the news.*
2. *Respect confidential information.*
3. *Especially if you have previous experience of visiting rare-bird sites, offer advice on any special arrangements which may need to be made, and offer on-site assistance if you are able.*
4. *Before setting out, ensure that you are fully informed concerning how to reach the site, and any special arrangements which have been made.*
5. *If you pass on the message, do so carefully and in full.*
6. *At the site, park sensibly and safely, follow any instructions responsibly, and always put the welfare of the bird first.*
7. *Never turn a blind eye to any misdemeanours committed by others.*
8. *Do not try to get closer than anyone else to view or—especially—to photograph the bird: let binoculars, telescopes and telephoto lenses cover the distance.*
9. *Be tactful, informative and friendly towards non-birdwatching onlookers or local people: they will probably be interested to know what is going on.*
10. *Be patient and restrained, especially if the bird moves suddenly to a new site nearby: give time for a new plan to be devised to cope with the situation.*
11. *Observe the Country Code at all times.*

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