Using social media to promote your research

The BOU actively promotes the use of social media for promoting ornithological research.

However, social media is a double-edged sword for anyone using it, and especially for engaged individuals, labs, departments and institutes who find they are spending more and more time dealing with issues arising from content shared on social media.

In order to minimise unintended consequences you should think carefully about what it is you are sharing, what you want to convey and how you want to convey it. By ensuring the content you share is both accurate and well-presented (i.e. images are clear and accompanying text explains what is going on) you minimise any reputational harm to you as an individual or to your lab, department or institute.

Using images on social media

There is nothing truer than the well-known saying "a picture paints a thousand words". Because social media is often rapid, with content constantly being shared, images are the hooks which draw others into a tweet or post. Images therefore need to be relevant and non-controversial (unless you are covering something controversial and using certain images to make a particular point).

Whilst other researchers might be familiar with lab, fieldwork or bird handling techniques being depicted, unless you have a closed account, your images are there for public consumption on many social platforms.

In particular, many members of the public don't understand what is right or wrong in the context of trapping and handling wild birds, and often their instinctive reaction is to think of the bird's welfare and that catching and handling them must be stressful to the bird and therefore must be bad. Images and videos of birds that do not appear natural, where birds do not look calm and are showing signs of stress, can be harmful not just to yourself, but to your institute and to wider science. The same applies to images of trapping techniques which may come across as intrusive or harmful.

We suggest that you pay careful attention when sharing the following images:

- **Birds in the hand**
  In the course of research, many birds are handled for ringing/banding and tracking purposes and researchers often share images of birds being processed as part of their research activities. Images selected to be used on social platforms should be considered very carefully and should follow ringing/banding best practices, including:
  - Ensure the area being used for photography is quiet, well-lit and you have an uncluttered background to photograph your subject against.
  - Birds should be held by an experienced ringer/bander using an approved (and species appropriate) grip.
  - Birds should be posed as naturally and calmly as possible.
  - Ensure the bird is not displaying any signs of stress, e.g. flicking wings, wings raised, open bills, closed eyes.
  - The image doesn't show any perception of mishandling, e.g. misplaced plumage.
  - Don't use images that appear to show a bird has been overly manipulated or crowded by people.
  - Avoid using images of birds in nets or traps – it's hard to take images of trapped birds that convey the true circumstances, or that won't be open to criticism for

taking photographs of what others would perceive to be a distressed bird (because its trapped or confined).

See these ringing/banding specific guidelines for further guidance:
- o [North American Banding Council – photographic guidelines](#)

- **Birds and people**
  - o The use of 'trophy' images (i.e. an individual showing off a bird to the camera) are inappropriate. Avoid using them, particularly in any media profile.
  - o Images that show birds in unnatural positions, e.g. sitting on shoulders/hats, should not be used on social fora.

- **Nests and contents**
  - o Nests and nest contents should never be manipulated.
  - o Avoid images of birds at the nest in a state of alarm or defending the nest.
    - ▪ If your research involves noting such behaviour, e.g. if testing the response to nest predators, then if images of alarmed birds are to be used, ensure this is contextualised in accompanying text.
  - o Images of nests and nest contents of rare species should only be taken with the appropriate licence, and this should be detailed in any accompany text.

Permission and credit

Ensure you have permission to use any image publicly.
- • If the image is yours, then it is recommended to hard credit images with © your name, date or month and year, e.g. © J O Bloggs, May 2019
- • If the image is not your own, then check it has been obtained from a legitimate source/site.
- • Add a hard credit to the image before using (e.g. the Creative Commons (CC) attribution that legitimate sites will include details of) and the source, e.g. J O Bloggs CC BY SA 2.0 via Flickr.
- • If you are unsure, then seek permission from the photographer/image owner.
- • In some instances, permission may have to be sought by the site owner/manager, as well as individuals in the image.
  - o NOTE: different countries have different legislation around the privacy of individuals in photographs, e.g. all European citizens are protected by GDPR legislation which all other countries are required to comply with (see [ico.org.uk](#)). This doesn't mean you can't take photographs of people when these are considered to be of 'legitimate interest' (see [this article](#) by Data Protection Law expert, Suzanne Dibble).

Context is everything

An image on its own can easily be misinterpreted, so always make sure that all shared images are adequately captioned to put the image in to context. Accompanying text may help reduce misinterpretation, but just as with images, any text can be taken out of context (and potentially used against you). Images that require detailed explanation to allay concerns are best posted on platforms which enable a longer, more detailed, text (e.g. Facebook or a blogs, or on Twitter, use a thread to expand on story being told in the image).

In doing this, consider the following to better inform your readers:

- • Your tweet/post text should contextualise the image:
  - o Be factual.
  - o What is the image of?
  - o What is happening?

- o Why are you doing this?
- o Why is it important?
- o Are you qualified to do what you are depicting?

- Be aware of potential issues:
    - o Does the image show anything controversial?
    - o Can the image be misinterpreted? What might the first impressions be by someone who is unfamiliar with the subject or process?
    - o What measures were taken to avoid welfare impacts?

Your use of language is also very important:

- Avoid language that could question your activities:
    - o e.g. mention of 'challenging conditions' without explaining what these were and how you minimised welfare impacts during such conditions.

- Consider what terminology is appropriate:
    - o Terms such as 'nets full of birds' and 'long days' could generate negative feedback.
    - o Mention of a 'tick' or 'ringing tick' lends support to the view some research is akin to twitching/collecting.

What about video?
Video can portrait much more than a single image. It does however come with its own challenges and issues.

- Make sure that content shared doesn't depict the same issues as for still images above.
- Audio captures not just the birds calls, but peoples' voices, nearby road noise or machinery.
- Avoid footage of behaviour such as the neck twisting of wrynecks, as some viewers may assume natural behaviour as an overly-stressed bird.

What about others taking photographing/filming your activities?
If you are being photographed or filmed by members of the public, or a film crew, then be aware that you have next to no control over content and subsequent use. Simply ensure that you remain professional and follow set practices and techniques, and you are careful of your spoken word which may be being recorded.

All of the above guidelines apply to your conduct in such circumstances.

If you yourself are photographing or filming the activities of other researchers, ensure you seek their permission before sharing on to any social platform.

Be aware of your platform

For ornithology, Twitter is the platform most likely to achieve the widest audience, and unlike some platforms where your content is only seen by your followers, Twitter is completely open (unless you lock your account so content is only visible to your approved followers). Many Facebook groups/pages, Instagram accounts and blogs are also totally open for anyone to access.

Closed (non-public) Facebook groups are generally the most secure in terms of a closed and trusted audience, assuming the correct settings are applied, but it is difficult to vet all group members, so you should always assume that any post could be seen by the public. Be aware also that people

frequently take screenshots of Facebook content and share on other open platforms (often without permission).

Your combined image and text should tell a story, or part of a story if presented as a thread. Be aware how an individual tweet/post may be viewed when taken in isolation or out of the context of the overall story presented, which may go unseen when others share just an individual tweet or post with their followers.

Remember that any electronic image can be copied and used out of context by others.

Responding to comments on social media

The more you share on social media, the more engagement you can expect, and with it, the more chance of negative comments. Respond in a measured way, and where possible, link to relevant welfare guidelines and protocols.

Don't respond without first thinking things through. Take your time to consider your reply, no matter how hard it is for you to remove any emotion, your response should follow the above guidelines and be measured, factual and accurate. Thinking it through now could save you much more time later.

If a conversation becomes inflamed, consider removing the original tweet/post and any of your own subsequent replies (but remember that others may have taken screenshots of them before they are removed).

Presenting your work at conferences

It is now the norm, certainly within ornithology, for scientific conferences and meetings to be pro-social media and event organisers openly encourage participants to share their own, and others', research/content being presented.

You should bear these guidelines in mind when preparing images for all such events and check any guidelines issues by an event.

If you do not want your work to be shared on social media, then you must display clearly a DO NOT SHARE icon on your title slide (or just on individual slides in your pack) or your poster.

BOU social media resources

Since 2012 the BOU has been educating our ornithological community about the use and benefits of using social media to promote research. Since Twitter is by far the social platform of choice for ornithologists, the content is Twitter-centric, but much of it easily crosses over to other platforms.

See here to access all BOU resources on social media.