

Bird Hides for Birders and Builders

Getting close to birds - in comfort and without scaring them away

Bird hides (or 'blinds') come in a huge variety of sizes and construction material, but the idea behind them is very simple - to provide concealment for one or more people so that birds may be more easily observed, photographed or caught. Birds have learned, with good reason, to associate humans with danger and concealment of the human form can bring birds much closer for study or photography. Undoubtedly the use of bird hides originated far back in human prehistory as hunting aids to catch birds for food and feathers. Now hides are widely constructed simply to provide people with the enjoyment of watching birds and raising environmental awareness. Unfortunately, hides are often inappropriately designed or sited, usually in a stereotyped or 'standard' way, with little imagination about their intended function. Given that the world contains 10,000 different kinds of birds in almost all global habitats, there is no such thing as a standard hide. However, some basic principles should be considered...

Portable, Temporary and Mobile Hides

The no-hide hide. The simplest hide is virtually no hide at all. If you stand or sit quietly and still, wearing unobtrusive clothing and being careful to make no sudden movements, birds may treat you as part of the landscape without feeling threatened by you. This effect can be enhanced by positioning yourself next to, or among, other objects so as to break up or conceal the typical human silhouette.

Portable hides. It is only a short step from this to using a one-person portable hide, either a commercially available one, or one that could be adapted from a toilet tent (available from suppliers of camping equipment) or made from an appropriate fabric and a simple frame. Ideally, a portable hide should be light in weight, drab in colour, with a non-shiny texture, easily carried and set up, weather-proof but breathable, stable and without loose flaps to blow about, and able to be used without constantly touching the walls or supports from within and so causing it to shake.

Temporary hides are often used for photography, especially at nests. Extreme examples are the guyed aluminium towers used by Jack and Lindsay Cupper, and by David Hollands, for photography at the nests of raptors and other birds high in tall trees. Permission may be needed to place temporary hides on private and public land, and the consent of land managers should be sought. Care must be taken to ensure that birds do not desert their nests and that human activity does not attract the curiosity of predators. Considerations of security and vandalism apply; a prominent hide may draw undesirable attention to a nest as well as to the hide itself and any equipment it contains.

Mobile hides. The commonest mobile hides are motor vehicles. It is often possible to get much closer to birds when in a car than on foot. The same principle also applies to the use of boats on waterways, especially when the engine is turned off and the boat allowed to drift with the current.

Permanent Hides

Your basic hide is a (usually) rectangular wooden shed, with slits or windows at the front to watch birds through and a door at the back to enter and leave by. Variations on this theme are innumerable, but this is the starting point on which you can improve, limited only by available resources, site and planning constraints and your imagination. If you can design a wooden box with a roof, window and door, you can design a bird-hide; but why stop there? One good way to stimulate design ideas is to visit as many existing bird-hides as you can, use them, and then assess how well they work for you and how they could be improved...

Design. The design of a permanent bird-hide should relate to the desired and intended function and setting. Design considerations include the numbers of people likely to visit, and for how long. Hides intended for individuals or small groups solely to watch birds for short periods of time when visiting a park wetland, for example, can be much simpler than those designed for large groups with toilets, lecture facilities and educational displays. Materials used should be appropriate to the design and the aesthetics of a hide's appearance in the landscape.

Approaches to hides usually need some kind of screening to minimise disturbance to the birds. This may be planted or retained vegetation, fences, embankments or some other kind of visual barrier, and is an important consideration at the initial planning and design stage. Such a barrier will, ideally, also help prevent noise disturbance, although visitors to hides should be advised to move and talk as quietly as possible anyway. Avoid surfacing approach paths with materials likely to be noisy when walked on, such as gravel. It may be desirable to construct wooden boardwalks to hides in swampy areas or where vegetation is sensitive to trampling damage. For hides open to the public, at least, regulations and requirements regarding wheelchair access must be considered.

Fields of view. Hides are built to allow people to look at birds. In the simplest, cheapest hides, this can be done through apertures or horizontal slits that should be wide enough to allow a good field of view, preferably wide enough to survey the full area in front of the hide where birds are likely to be seen. Apertures can be made at a several heights to accommodate a variety of users – from young children to tall adults. Viewing slits sometimes have hinged shutters so that they can be closed when not in use; without shutters birds such as swallows may nest inside the hide itself. The interior of the hide should be relatively dark so that birds cannot see inside to be spooked by movement. Doors to hides should be screened to prevent birds seeing back-lit human silhouettes.

Glass windows may be used instead of viewing slits. Advantages include better weather- and sound-proofing. Tinted glass will help keep the interior dark but may affect some photography. Glass can be angled so that the top of the window is further out than the bottom; this helps prevent birds from attacking their reflections on the exterior.

Perches and platforms can be sited at convenient distances in front of the hide. Small islands or floating platforms can be used at wetland hides for birds to roost or nest on. Dead trees, standing or fallen, as well as rocks, can be placed to provide suitable perches for good viewing. High perches may be used as vantage points for raptors.

Crake hides. For watching crakes and rails – those usually shy and hard-to-see skulkers of dense wetland vegetation – a hide can be placed in front of a reed-bed used by these species, with a straight metre-wide path slashed through the reeds and running directly away from the hide. This allows watchers to see the birds that cross the path from one side to the other in the course of their foraging and social activities. The view-path will need regular maintenance.

Placement. Generally, hides should be designed and placed so as to be unobtrusive, to blend harmoniously with the landscape, to reinforce the experience of natural processes, while placed to give us the opportunity to enjoy and study wild birds. However, sometimes a hide may be built as a prominent memorial or to make an architectural statement. Ultimately, the external appearance of a hide is about human perceptions; the birds are not going to be bothered by it, provided it does the job of adequate concealment of the human occupants.

Interior furnishings. In the simplest hides, you need virtually nothing, although it is desirable to have a ledge at the viewpoints for people to rest their elbows on while looking through binoculars or focussing cameras. Depending on space and resources, basic improvements can include fixed benches (at the right height or heights for people to view from), bird identification posters, an annotated list of birds and other animals seen at that site, and whiteboards with markers (for up-to-date news about sightings and site conditions). If installing fixed seating, allow some space for those who use tripod-mounted telescopes and cameras. Carpets or matting on the floor and at the entrances will reduce the sound of tramping feet. Insulation on jambs will reduce noise from closing doors and shutters.

Feeding. It is NOT recommended that food be provided to tempt birds to visit hides. Providing wild birds with food is fraught with dangers of unhealthy diets, spreading disease and attracting pests. Hides for birdwatchers should only be planned for sites which birds visit naturally or are attracted to for reasons other than artificial feeding.

Security and public safety. It is a sad fact that many hides constructed in places open to the public and left unguarded or unlocked can suffer from vandalism and criminal activities. Fittings may be stolen or damaged, fires lit inside and walls defaced with graffiti. It is essential that, when planning the construction of a hide for general public use, that security considerations are taken into account. Public access should be monitored and, if necessary, restricted to times when management of the area is active and usage controllable.

Maintenance. The need for regular inspection and ongoing maintenance must also be considered at the planning stage, not only of the hide structure but of the interior fittings, educational displays, signage and access paths as well. Provision must be made for the disposal of rubbish and the regular removal of litter. In addition to this, the area occupied by the birds may require some maintenance – such as the replacement of fallen perches and the pruning of vegetation to prevent fire hazard and allow a clear field of view.

The Birds Come First

Legal obligations and ethical codes. Laws regarding wildlife protection, planning permission, design requirements and occupational health and safety issues must, of course, be adhered to. In addition to these, most birders subscribe to ethical codes on appropriate behaviour to ensure that the welfare of the birds and the protection of their habitat is paramount. For more information on this, please see BA Information Sheet No.9, *Guidelines on Recreational Bird Watching*, available from Birds Australia (contact details below).

Education and conservation surveys. Hides are excellent as educational tools, with their ability to bring people to see wild birds acting naturally. Schools can use visits to hides as part of environmental education programs, and children relate very well to observing a variety birds behaving in ways that reflect their biology and their habitats. Hides can be used as focal points for ongoing surveys that help monitor the health of our environment. An example of such a survey is the national Atlas of Australian Birds project. For more information about this project, see BA Information Sheet No.19, *Atlasing: Mapping our Birdlife*, available from Birds Australia.

For information about Australia's wild birds and how you can enrich your life by watching them, studying their behaviour and movements, and helping to protect our natural environment, please call Birds Australia on: (03) 9882 2622, or fax: (03) 9882 2677; write to us at 415 Riversdale Road, Hawthorn East 3123, Australia.

Email us at: mail@birdsaustralia.com.au or visit our website at: www.birdsaustralia.com.au Call The Birding Shop on tel (03) 9813 5488, fax (03) 9813 1744, email: sales@thebirdingshop.com or Web: www.thebirdingshop.com

Birds Australia works to facilitate research, conservation and enjoyment of native birds and their habitats in the Australasian region. Birds Australia is the Australian Partner of BirdLife International.