

Wildlife Interpretation Guidelines

Updated April 2015

**Produced by Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission
Scotland as part of the Sharing Good Practice programme**

These guidelines are intended for people whose work involves showing people wildlife and explaining its significance, including tour guides, countryside rangers, wildlife conservation staff and volunteers.

They were produced by combining the experience and knowledge of wildlife interpreters at two Sharing Good Practice workshops, run by Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland and facilitated by Susan Cross of TellTale in 2013 and 2014.

GOOD WILDLIFE INTERPRETATION IS GOOD INTERPRETATION

Wildlife interpretation, like all interpretation, is about communicating well with people. The main focus of these guidelines is on the specific challenges of being a wildlife interpreter. However, as some people may need to tackle wildlife interpretation without any previous experience of interpretation, we reiterate some of the key generic principles here:

Know your audience

Spend time with the people who will be reading the words you write, watching your webcam or following your guided tour. Talk to them to find out what excites them about wildlife, what their expectations are, what they are worried about and what they know. They will probably be very different from you so make sure you plan and design your interpretation to suit them, not you.

Your content, media and language should be relevant to your audience. Provide information in different ways to suit different levels of knowledge and types of people.

Plan your content

Most people will not remember much of what you tell them. Plan and use your message to make sure that they remember the things that are most important to you and your organisation.

Ensure that your interpretation is concise, well-structured and has impact.

What you write or say should be relevant to what people can see or hear at your site and to the local area.

Create great experiences

People are more likely to remember what they do, what they see and how they feel than the information they read or hear. Create memorable experiences that communicate your messages. Aim to stimulate people's imagination, sensory awareness and emotions as well as giving information.

Choose interpretation media carefully so that they enhance people's experience of the place and their ability to explore and understand it. Make sure that your interpretation does not detract from the experience or the natural environment.

Aim to improve

Evaluate the success of your interpretation and change or develop it as a required.

If you would like more information on how to create successful interpretation, look at the websites of Scottish Natural Heritage and the Association for Heritage Interpretation.

WHAT MAKES WILDLIFE INTERPRETATION DIFFERENT?

Wildlife interpreters have to tackle some challenges and considerations that their counterparts at historical sites do not encounter. These are mostly connected to the unpredictable behaviour of wildlife and the fact that most wildlife lives in wild places.

The following advice addresses some of the key concerns of wildlife interpreters.

How can I manage visitors' expectations?

'It's not like on the television'

'Native species are not as sexy as pandas.'

Many wildlife interpreters fear that people who are used to seeing wildlife from around the world in close-up on their television screens may be underwhelmed by local species. However, direct experience, even of common species, can be powerful and memorable. It is the interpreter's role to facilitate and enhance this experience.

Do not underestimate or undervalue the novelty, adventure or impact of being out in a wild environment. Allow people time to adjust to and enjoy it.

"Always provide something - even if the wildlife you are looking for does not cooperate."

People with little experience of looking for wildlife may have unrealistic expectations of what they will see. Manage these expectations by not 'overselling' the experience

and being realistic about the likelihood of seeing the species concerned. Focusing on the wider experience rather than the sighting of a particular species may help. Avoid an 'if you don't see it you've (or we've) failed' mentality.

What can we interpret? What will people be interested in?

It is important to choose appropriate wildlife for your interpretation. You need your wildlife to be visible (or at least audible) in order to interpret it. Seasonal, timid, underwater and otherwise invisible species may not be good choices.

If your site has interpretation about iconic but hard to see wildlife, include some interpretation about species which visitors are likely to see.

Some species (like invertebrates and plants) may appear harder to 'sell' than the more obvious and often dramatic birds or mammals. Use your passion and interest in the small and overlooked things to communicate what fascinates you about them. Be imaginative and think laterally. Develop interesting activities and content that may include people stories, science stories, art activities, local stories and folklore.

How can we help people have a better experience?

Keep the experience as simple as you can. Less intervention can create a more rewarding experience of seeing wildlife. Too much technology, for example, can dilute the impact of the experience and the sense of discovery.

'Value the experience you can offer.'

Seeing wildlife can involve teaching people how to stop, wait and look. This may be a new skill for some visitors so the interpreter may have to provide support, and simple activities to demonstrate how to move quietly or to sit motionless. This can add to the experience of the event.

Put time and effort into explaining appropriate behaviour for a good wildlife experience. This may include helping your visitors to feel comfortable in the environment which may be unfamiliar and potentially scary.

What should I tell them?

Concentrate on telling people about what they can see so that the information meshes well with the experience.

There are many sources of generic wildlife information; visitors will be more engaged by specific local information about your wildlife and how to see it. Providing updates on recent sightings, and the best time of day / time of tide to look out for species, details of behaviour and breeding success of local individuals and populations will be more engaging and useful than a list of facts that can be found online.

How can interpretation promote conservation?

Giving visitors good quality experiences of wildlife can lead to conversations about conservation. Be prepared to talk about how the species is doing locally and nationally. Highlight the work being done to help it and the impact this has had.

Wildlife interpretation can be (but does not need to be) designed to influence attitudes and behaviour. This is a specialist area and requires specific skills.

Similarly interpreters may be called on to encourage donations, membership or other support for the organisation. This can be difficult and needs to be carefully planned.

'Be aware of consequences of your actions.'

Your interpretation should demonstrate environmental good practice in the materials it uses and the way it sits within the environment. Always consider the impact of your interpretation on the site and its wildlife. Minimise the disturbance to wildlife.

Embedding sensitivity to the site in the interpretation planning is crucial. Wildlife viewing should be planned alongside wildlife and habitat management.

How do we interpret something that changes?

Wildlife is unpredictable. It changes with the seasons and the weather. Some of it moves around and hides. This makes it interesting – but challenging for interpreters.

Wildlife interpretation needs to be flexible to reflect these changes. Panels, leaflets and webpages may need to change seasonally.

When leading tours or walks do not over-promise on seeing a particular species. Nurture a sense of discovery and an appreciation of uncertainty. Visitors can enjoy looking for wildlife, as well as actually seeing it. Aim to offer a unique and memorable experience.

MEDIA AND TECHNIQUES FOR INTERPRETING WILDLIFE

Wildlife interpretation can use the same media as any other interpretation. Choosing the right interpretive media depends on considering the needs of the visitors, the constraints and opportunities of the site, cost and management/maintenance. Issues of special relevance to media selection for wildlife interpretation are:

- It is often outside
- It can be in remote areas

- It is often part of a sensitive site/experience where intrusion is an important issue
- It deals with a changing resource. The content may therefore need to be refreshed in order to be up to date and relevant.

Face to face interpretation is often favoured by wildlife interpreters, for obvious reasons: a good guide is adaptable and can respond to the needs and interests of different audiences. Guides can support wildlife watching skills as well as giving information. However, this is not a cheap option and is not always feasible, for instance in remote locations. Some visitors may be put off by the thought of needing to join a group to find out about wildlife.

Arguably, wildlife guides need to be even more skilled in the use of silence than other interpreters.

Panels have their place, especially on unstaffed sites and for visitors who do not want conversation. High quality images are particularly important in wildlife interpretation, they can inspire as well as inform. Good images can be particularly helpful for overseas visitors; the English names for particular species may not translate easily.

Consider the visual impact of panels carefully; they should be sited so that they do not intrude into the experience of wild sites.

Webcam and CCTV Webcams or CCTV can help show people what they do not see and/or provide close up live images of wildlife which is too sensitive for visitors to approach. It is helpful to have member of staff who can talk about what is onscreen, respond to questions and move the camera efficiently. Screens will usually need some supporting information. You can also provide edited highlights as well as the live feed. Maintenance is vital - if you cannot provide it, this media is probably not your answer.

Smartphones and tablets You could use social media to encourage people to share their wildlife experience, particularly their photographs, by making direct invitations and displaying hashtags. Look at the connectivity on your site - provide Wi-Fi in your visitor centre or café if possible. However, be aware that some visitors may wish to avoid the use of technology onsite, especially in a hide, and may not like to see others using it.

QR codes and similar devices can link visitors directly to a website and be a visually less obtrusive way of providing up-to-date information. They are only appropriate if the website is regularly updated and is mobile-enabled, and if there is good connectivity onsite.

Apps can provide a media rich resource for visitors. Text, images, moving image and audio can all be provided for the visitors' own hardware. However, remember the use of these onsite can be intrusive for other visitors and for wildlife; playing some

bird calls, for example, can be detrimental to the breeding efforts of the real birds onsite.

Real objects, including touch tables, taxidermy, feely boxes and found objects to pass around remain a valuable tool in wildlife interpretation. They give people direct, authentic sensory contact with the natural world.

Interactives and games. There are many examples of good, engaging, low-tech interactives that interpret wildlife through practical activity, games, quizzes and puzzles.

Our thanks to everyone who contributed to the development of these guidelines

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