



Photographers Etiquette!

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Might it be appropriate, again, to publish a piece on Photography Etiquette?

Thanks to popular magazines and social media, considerable interest in iconic sites and exceptional wildlife habitats predictably attracts enthusiasts and experience seekers to visit, often with associated detrimental risks. My example below while wildlife-focused; education and common sense apply to anywhere we photograph, whether with expensive camera gear or smartphones.

Specific to my 2025 experience observing the Crested Cara Cara nest west of Ryan Field just off Highway 86, the Ajo Highway. A massive twig nest, long time home to a nesting pair of Crested Cara Cara, lies a mere 50 feet north of a barbed wire fence access road to a buried gas pipeline. Crested Caracaras typically defend their nesting territory within 300 feet of the nest. The massive Saguaro lives on Arizona State Trust land, marked by a few aging signs. It is unclear if the access road area off the shoulder of AZ 86 is a legal parking area. Nonetheless, professional and amateur photographers and seasoned and curious bird watchers visit the spot each spring.

With long and longer lenses, most people are content to set up along the fence, hoping for action shots of the adults delivering carrion and live food to the ever-growing chicks. I photographed the first chicks on April 14, 2025. The first fledging left on May 29, 2025. A few people, including some Facebook-based birding and wildlife group members, scaled the fence for closer looks. One of-fender shouted in response to being asked to return the 'safe distance' of the nest, exclaiming, "But I have never seen one of these birds before." The following weekend, she returned asking if she could climb the fence. They walked with the birds' prime hunting area. The birds might have to tolerate a few invaders but potentially tamper with their food supply, especially in the hunting area for the fledged chick; well, that action threatens the long-term existence of this nest.

Social media posts document the Adult birds bringing in snakes, lizards, birds, and rodents. Not published, to the best of my knowledge, are the photos of Mom delivering Doritos and scraps, likely taken from waste cans. The prize for most observers is the action shots, abandoning the rest of the Cara Cara story.

This year, several respectful photographers photographed a fledgling on the desert floor, calling out to its mother as it was unable to fly back into the nest. Mom delivered a fresh rabbit, oh, by the way, in the same area where the over-the-fence invaders stood weeks before. The fledgling did not eat the rabbit; Mom fed him, then took the remaining food back to the nest for the remaining two near full-size chicks. Learning to eat, hunt, and find water are essential skills for survival.

Once the chick fledges, they yet know how to hunt, find water, and survive. Experts say they hang around for months learning these skills from the adults. Their territorial living space seems larger than a 50-foot area around the nest. How far do the adults range to hunt? When do the chicks go to live the following year? What is the "rest of the story"?

The adults and, soon, the offspring hunt, forage, and scavenge from the base of the Saguro-hosted nest to miles distant. Fiercely defending their territory, the Crested Cara Cara successfully defends their young from most predators, well, except some humans. Long-time veterans of the watch, this following report indicates that the nest has failed in the past. Failing means no offspring survived to adulthood. Too much pressure and the column does not work. In this particular location, the Highway is a source of food. Watchers staying behind the fence appear not to bother the brood, yet one wonders if a crowd of 100 might impose a threat. Photographers visit every day, from dawn to dusk. I have witnessed many at a time. Watch the eyes of the chicks and adults; I am sure they see us.

How might we safeguard these iconic areas?

- ❓ Close them down
- ❓ Refrain from posting images during nesting times. Keep it a "secret"
- ❓ Teach manors, and basic common sense, and etiquette to the visitors
- ❓ Restrict access to a limited number of visitors
- ❓ Post signs at a safe distance (for the site and the visitors)
- ❓ Watch the iconic site disappear
- ❓ Other ideas

One Facebook group prohibits posting photos of this nest until the young ones fledge—a sound idea aimed at somehow stemming the tide of visitors. These are good ideas, but they fail to address the potential for causing a failed nest. Nest failures happen far too often. The Bald Eagle nests are frequently protected on the ground and in aircraft flight height restrictions: National Bird, Endangered, and all the right reasons. Safeguarding the well-being of wildlife (and other extraordinary things and places, such as Fossil Creek) is possible. Might photo ethics contribute to solutions?

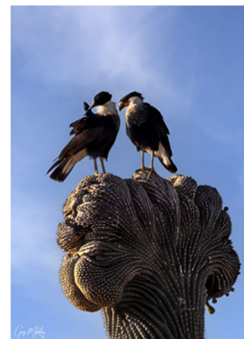
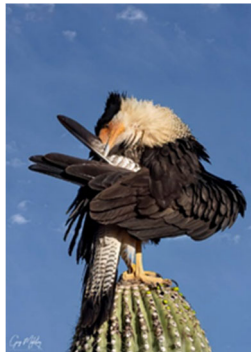
Once a popular area gains popularity, special events attract even more visitors. Normal human behavior, I believe. Invading the site's or wildlife's space and well-being is a responsibility, if not simply common sense.

Photographers' etiquette applies to any place we visit, whether it's a wildlife sanctuary, a city, the wild outdoors, or any other location.

- = Never endanger the location or the inhabitants.
- = Maintain a safe distance, err on the side of caution
- = Never leave trash or injure anything, including rocks, structures, features, animals, or people.
- = Never walk in front of others.
- = Never nurture the life or alter the landscape to render a better image.
- = Respect that others might have their camera on, especially during long exposure opportunities such as astrophotography or night photography. When someone says they are "open," refrain from turning on a light!
- = Respect and Common Sense make a difference.

Photography, or any visit for that matter, is a privilege. If we spoil it, we lose it. Social media, growing populations, and increasing human land use are facts. Ditch the 'It is all about me' in favor of others and the future. Let's do our part.

I hope so!



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Pondering along in old age without fear, excepting what I can do Enjoying every minute of it!