



IUCN SSC PRIMATES  
**SECTION ON  
HUMAN-PRIMATE  
INTERACTIONS**



IUCN SSC  
**PRIMATE**  
Specialist Group

# Responsible Primate-Watching for Tourists

SIÂN WATERS, MALENE F. HANSEN *et al.*

Version 1.0



The Section on Human-Primate Interactions of the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group

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## The Section on Human-Primate Interactions of the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group

The IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group Section on Human-Primate Interactions (SHPI) is an interdisciplinary group of more than 50 experienced human and non-human primate experts, from primate habitat countries or who work in primate habitat countries. The SHPI was established in 2018 in response to increased interactions between humans and wild primates with the goal of better understanding their multi-dimensional nature.



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## Foreword

by

Dr Russell A. Mittermeier, Chair, IUCN SSC  
Primate Specialist Group



A publication of The IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group Section on Human-Primate Interactions

With the online publication of *Responsible Primate-Watching for Tourists*, we would like to continue to promote the hobby/sport of *primate-watching*, and its associated activity, *primate life-listing*. The idea for this derives from birdwatching—one of the most popular hobbies in North America, Europe, and Australia, and increasingly elsewhere across the world. Birdwatching has been with us for a long time, and its popularity is growing. It has benefited by an ever-increasing number of guidebooks that cover the entire planet and, in the past 15 years, by the availability of new sophisticated equipment such as phone apps for bird identification using visual and sound information. The most striking example is the phone app Merlin (<https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org>), released for free by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, that has an average of 700,000 active users per month, and counting. Huge progress has resulted from more websites connecting birders around the world, and from global bird databases such as eBird (<https://ebird.org>), housed by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University (USA), or regional or national databases, such as the Euro Bird Portal (<https://eurobirdportal.org>) where birders report their observations. All of this has been good for conservation, stimulating awareness of and love for birds, and providing many ecotourism-based economic opportunities for communities living in or near bird habitats. The passion for birds has become a multibillion-dollar industry, with at least some of the benefits accruing to the bird-rich countries of the tropics.

If we consider tropical countries with very high bird diversity, such as Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Indonesia, Kenya, Tanzania, and many others, the economic opportunity is also very significant. The National Audubon Society estimated that 150,000 bird-watchers will visit Colombia from the United States over the decade 2017–2027, generating US\$47 million annually and sustaining 7,500 new jobs (Ocampo-Peñuela and Winton, 2017). These authors indicated, however, that the numbers could be an underestimate if Colombia can emulate the recent surge in birdwatching tourism in neighbouring Peru, where the number of birdwatching tourists doubled from 2012 to 2013, yielding an annual gross income of US\$89 million (Lacouture, 2017). Demand for bird-watching tourism appears to be sustainable, as the global market is already very large, with 46 million bird-watchers.

Inspired by the success and impact of birdwatching and bird life-listing, we decided more than 25 years ago to launch *primate-watching* and *primate life-listing* as a formally recognised activity (e.g., Coniff, 2007). There are in fact quite a few of us primate-watchers around already, and some of us have been active for as long as five decades. By comparison with what exists for birds, we have very little in the way of good, published material to identify primates, such as country or regional field guides and other visual and auditory aids.

Fortunately, this is changing. We tried to stimulate primate-watching in 1994 with the first edition of a book on lemurs, and we have since published three more editions of this field guide and a number of other titles on primates, and still more are in preparation. In addition, a number of other authors have produced very useful primate guides, including ones for Central Africa, Asia, Brazil, Colombia, French Guiana, Indonesia, India, and Vietnam, and primate information of variable quality can also be found in a number of other regional or national guidebooks on mammals.

Mittermeier and Rylands also launched a series of Pocket Identification Guides in 2004, first with Conservation International and now with Re:wild. These are small convenient folding guides to identify animals from a particular region. Twenty-four have now been published, 19 of them on primates, including four on lemurs. We have also prepared an App for lemur-watching, which we continue to work on bringing to launch.

Why should we bother? Well, first of all, because primate-watching and primate life-listing are fun. Those of us who are as passionate about these animals as the birders are about their species, really enjoy seeing monkeys, apes, lemurs, lorises, galagos, pottos and tarsiers in their natural environments, and we want more of you to get excited about these animals as well. But it is really about more than just entertainment. First and foremost, we want to stimulate awareness of primates through such activity. Second, primates are found mainly in tropical rain forests and are the most visible mammals in these forests. As such, they have been, and continue to be, excellent flagships for these dwindling habitats and have contributed greatly to tropical rain forest conservation over the past 40 to 50 years. Furthermore, we need more primate-based ecotourism to provide economic alternatives to the communities living in close proximity to the habitats in which primates live. These communities need to benefit economically from the presence of primate populations if we expect them to take a major role in conserving them. To ensure that this happens, we need to go and see these creatures in their natural environments, interact with the communities upon whose survival they ultimately depend, share our excitement and enthusiasm, and, after all is said and done, make a contribution to the local economy. In many places, this may be the only effective tool at our disposal to ensure the survival of Critically Endangered and Endangered primates, and it needs to happen now.

To be sure, some primate ecotourism already exists. In Central Africa, mountain gorilla tourism has been in place for more than 40 years and is an excellent model. What is more, many new primate sites are being developed every year, including other gorilla

species and subspecies in Central Africa, chimpanzee tourism in several countries, and orangutan tourism in parts of Sumatra and Borneo. China has developed several sites for seeing the golden monkey and other snub-nosed monkey species. Many macaque and langur species are easily seen at sacred sites and even in many urban areas in China, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Southeast Asia, and increasingly in natural forests as well. More monkeys can be seen in a wide variety of parks and reserves in Mexico, Central and South America. And of course, the wonderful lemurs of Madagascar can now be seen in a growing number of sites throughout this unique country.



**Fig.1:** A selection of Pocket Identification Guides produced by the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group and partner organisations

Unfortunately, primate ecotourism has not always been done as well or as carefully as we might like, and we need to improve it wherever the quality is poor or even detrimental to primate survival. However, we need to recognise that it is here to stay, and we simply have to get it done in the most appropriate manner possible to promote the conservation of tropical forests, the well-being of local communities, the economies of the countries where primates occur, and of course, the survival of the primates themselves. What is more our IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group has already published several best practice guidelines for appropriate primate ecotourism, especially for great apes (e.g., [Macfie and Williamson, 2010](#); [Waters \*et al.\*, 2021](#)), and a number of others are in the works. In any case, we have only started to scratch the surface of the potential that exists for primate-watching, and to demonstrate at a much higher level the economic benefits that it can provide.

## Further Reading

Conniff, R. 2007. Primate watching is the new birding. *Audubon Magazine*. Available online: <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/july-august-2007/primate-watching-new-birding>.

Lacouture, M. 2017. Colombia: Destino mundial de avistamiento de aves (Colombia: world-class bird-watching destination). *Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo*. Available online: <http://www.mincit.gov.co>.

Macfie, E.J. and Williamson, E.A. 2010. *Best Practice Guidelines for Great Ape Tourism*. IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group, Gland, Switzerland.

Ocampo-Peñuela, N. and Winton, S. 2017. Economic and conservation potential bird-watching tourism in post-conflict Colombia. *Trop. Conserv. Sci.* 10 : 1–6.

Waters, S., Setchell, J.M., et al. 2021. *Best Practice Guidelines for Responsible Images of Non-Human Primates*. IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group.

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## Introduction

A publication of The IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group Section on Human-Primate Interactions



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Primate-watching is the activity of observing primates. These can be free-ranging in habitats such as forests, savannahs, mangroves, rocky shores, agricultural lands and urban areas, far from people or in close association with them, or captive in zoological settings. Primate-watching can be a positive experience for humans and contribute to primate conservation by conserving habitat, contributing to local communities, and raising awareness of primates and their threats. However, primate-watching can be detrimental to primates and dangerous for humans if it is not conducted responsibly.

Until now, the only specific recommendations for primate-watching tourists have been the Best Practice Guidelines for [responsible great ape tourism](#) which were published in 2010. These guidelines are accompanied by additional education and training materials on the website, [Protect Great Apes from Covid-19](#). We recommend that you refer to both of these websites if you are interested in great ape tourism.

*Responsible Primate Watching for Tourists* aims to provide easily accessible information about how to watch primates, while having minimal impact on them. The recommendations provide advice on how to behave around primates either in a planned tour or during unplanned encounters, for example, at roadsides or temples.

The recommendations in *Responsible Primate Watching for Tourists* cover various geographical regions and various primate groups, excluding the great apes. We have organised *Responsible Primate Watching for Tourists* so that it can be downloaded as a whole, but also so that each section is available as a standalone document to encourage dissemination of this information among primate-watching tourists via mobile devices.

The concepts of [primate-watching](#) and [primate life-listing](#) are explained followed by recommendations for [gibbon watching](#), encouraging primate-watching tourists to be mindful of these apes' vulnerability to human transmitted diseases and to adopt precautionary practices. Monkeys in Africa and Asia provide some great viewing



opportunities, but some animals are unafraid of people, posing a potential hazard to both humans and monkeys. [This section](#) provides advice on how to moderate our behaviour to enable us and our companions to avoid some of the more aggressive encounters that can happen when viewing these species. The [lemurs of Madagascar](#) are a popular tourist draw along with the diverse monkeys of [Central and South America](#). Watching these animals in their natural habitats can bring valuable revenue to communities and contribute to conservation if responsibly conducted. Not all primates are native to the places where we watch them and this is the case for the vervet monkeys found in large numbers on some of the Caribbean islands. [This section](#) explains how to practice tourism with caution to avoid exploiting the primates on these islands. The needs of nocturnal primates (found in Africa, Asia and South America) [and set out here](#), are very different to those of diurnal primates. Macaques, baboons and vervet monkeys can often be viewed opportunistically at roadsides, and [this section](#) provides recommendations on how to watch these roadside primates safely and responsibly. Thousands of people view [primates in zoos](#) every year and recommendations are provided on how to enjoy and learn from your zoo visit while being mindful of primate welfare. Unfortunately, primates are often seen as cute and desirable which has led to them being exploited for tourism. In this final section, we provide advice on how to ensure [good primate welfare](#) in tourism hotspots and elsewhere.

We hope that by making this information easily accessible, we will increase the benefits of primate-watching tourism and minimise its negative effects. We encourage everyone to follow the recommendations and share them widely. We will strive to make them available in the languages appropriate for the different chapters, and easily accessible via our website (<https://human-primate-interactions.org/>) and on an application for mobile devices.

## **Useful links**

[Primate pocket guides](#)

Mammal Watching - [Primate-watching and life-listing](#)

[Best Practice Guidelines for Great Ape Tourism](#)

[Best Practice Guidelines for Responsible Images of Non-Human Primates.](#)

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