

Community Guidelines for Contributors to the Martha's Vineyard Atlas of Life

Respect habitat and wildlife:

Look for wildlife only where the public is allowed or where you have permission.

Proactively seek out and observe the rules for properties you visit (e.g., check organizational websites).

If no rules are available, observe common sense measures to minimize your impact on habitat and wildlife:

Stay on trails.

Avoid stepping or standing on vegetation.

Especially with vertebrates, which have complex behaviors that are easily disrupted by disturbance, maintain a safe distance from wildlife you're observing and avoid prolonged or intense disruption of an animal's routine.

Leave nothing behind when you leave. Never, ever litter.

Respect rare and vulnerable species:

iNaturalist automatically obscures the locations of some rare species, but not all. Think carefully about whether it is wise to post a rare species in iNaturalist. If you do post, we encourage iNat users to manually obscure the coordinates of Federally-listed, State-listed, or locally rare species. This can be done using the "Geoprivacy" tab while submitting or editing an observation. Note that a determined poacher may be able to estimate the location of an obscured observation by looking at other, unobscured observations you uploaded around the same time and place.

Massachusetts manages its state-listed species through its Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP). When visiting conservation lands or easements, we recommend notifying the organization that owns or manages the property if you find state-listed or otherwise significant wildlife. Awareness of such species allows organizations to submit listed species records to NHESP, adjust site management if appropriate, and showcase the benefits of their good stewardship.

Even if not formally listed under the state Endangered Species Act, locally rare species and vulnerable individuals such as nesting birds merit additional protection. Be especially careful to minimize disturbance of them, and be cautious in sharing locations. Note that iNaturalist allows you to manually obscure the coordinates of any of your observations.

Respect other people:

Be quiet and unobtrusive in the field.

Do not let your activity interfere with legitimate uses of the land by other parties.

Commit to high-quality data:

Keep your meta-data accurate: iNaturalist automatically gleans date and time information from your phone or camera, so make sure that the clock in your device is set correctly.

Endeavor to submit the best possible photographs to support your observations. Multiple angles generally improve the chances of an accurate identification. Do your best to learn what characteristics are important for the identification of the taxa you're interested in, and try to get photos showing those features.

Make a good-faith effort, to the best of your ability level, to correctly identify everything you submit to iNaturalist, other platforms, or organizations.

Avoid blindly accepting iNaturalist's proposed identifications, which are suggestions, not definitive IDs. Use the "Compare" button to make sure an ID is plausible based on appearance and distribution. Use other platforms, such as bugguide.net, to help refine iNaturalist's suggestions.

When in doubt, consider posting uncertain IDs at a higher taxonomic level: for example, if you don't know what species something is, consider posting it at the genus level. Less precise IDs are better than actively wrong ones.

Keep learning:

Even the best naturalist has barely scratched the surface of nature's diversity and complexity. Remain open to learning; be grateful for help from more experienced observers, and express that gratitude; do not let your ego prevent you from accepting someone else's improved identification.

Help others learn:

We all start as beginners, and nobody becomes an expert on their own. Show your gratitude for the help you've received by seeking out ways to help others learn. Depending on your level of ability, you might:

Invite friends or family members to accompany you on outings.

Respond generously if strangers ask you what you're looking at in the field.

On iNaturalist, identify for other participants observations of taxa that you're familiar with.

Offer to lead walks for conservation organizations or schools.

Publish articles ranging from organizational newsletter pieces to peer-reviewed research in academic journals.