



Viewing **Nature**

Are you looking at me?



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Wildlife watching is fun and rewarding, but even the most responsible viewers may inadvertently put themselves, or the animals they seek, at risk. Please keep the following in mind when visiting Florida's natural areas.

Every animal differs in how close you may approach before it pauses in its feeding, nesting or resting activities, or before it flees altogether. Disturbances can be disastrous for animals, especially the cumulative effect of frequent disruptions, a common occurrence at beaches, waterways and other busy recreation sites. When disturbed, animals expend valuable energy reserves needed for migrating, tending to young or escaping predators. Fleeing parents may abandon a nest and expose eggs or young to temperature extremes or to predators.

There are signs to let you know when you are too close. Has the animal stopped feeding? Is it looking at you? Does it appear agitated or skittish? Does the animal begin to move away? These behaviors are all signs of disturbance, and you should move back immediately. When possible, use binoculars or zoom lenses to extend your view. If an adult animal allows you to approach, something's wrong. It may be sick or injured or

capable of aggressive behavior.

Don't feed wild animals, as they may abandon their natural diet and lose their fear of humans. Such animals can become aggressive or dangerous or may risk crossing busy roads to seek out human habitations. To report people feeding wildlife, including wild dolphins or sharks, call Wildlife Alert toll-free at 888-404-FWCC.

Young animals are rarely abandoned by their parents, so if you find one that looks helpless, the parents are probably nearby, waiting until you leave. The longer you stay, the longer the youngster must go without food and protection from predators.

While viewing wildlife, respect private property, even if the animal does not. Obey posted signs near nesting areas and stay on roads, trails and paths to minimize habitat disturbance.

Finally, keep your pets at home. They may frighten or harm the wildlife you are seeking; many sites prohibit them altogether. It's against Florida law for you or your pets to chase, harass or harm wildlife. **FW**

A northern mockingbird peers around a tree trunk.