

Drone Ethics and Courtesies

10-8-2025 by Spencer Smith

Drones are here to stay. That is a “for sure” thing. Using them responsibly and in harmony with the surroundings and people is what we need to strive for.

The two complaints I hear from people most often are the “sound” of the drone and “you are invading my privacy”. I will address these both. Nothing here is to be construed as legal statutes or laws. Just to show that harmony can exist.

If the drone or UAV operator has complied with the Federal and FAA requirements they can fly if there is no area or local restrictions. An area you might like to fly in could be a State or National Park. You must obtain written permission in advance to fly in these places.

Let’s address noise or sound. Most small drones are quiet compared to larger delivery or agricultural drones. You can purchase “after-market” quieter propellers if there is an issue.

Now let’s address the “privacy” aspect of the discussion.

Just because they are cheap and simple to fly, it doesn’t mean the pictures and video they take can’t harm other people. I had a discussion recently with a woman that went down her front steps to find a drone hovering waist high in front of her garage door. She said next time she would shoot it down. I cautioned her to think twice and not do that as it is a Federal offense.

Can you shoot down drones around or above your property?

No. It’s illegal under federal law to shoot at an aircraft. A private citizen shooting at any aircraft – including unmanned aircraft – poses a significant safety hazard. An unmanned aircraft hit by gunfire could crash, causing damage to persons or property on the ground, or it could collide with other objects in the air. Shooting at an unmanned aircraft will result in a civil penalty from the FAA and/or criminal charges from federal, state or local law enforcement. I saw a recent case in August 2025 in CT where a guy shot down a Walmart delivery drone. He was

handcuffed and arrested and paid a \$5000 fine and is being sued by Walmart for the cost of the drone----likely to be over \$20,000 if they win. So never do this.

Even closer to my home in Maine in Orrington, ME a search was being conducted for a missing dog by a licensed commercial drone operator from NH with a thermal drone in September, 2025 and his drone was shot down. A person was charged and has a court appearance scheduled. The same commercial drone operator had another drone shot at in the Dover, ME area a couple days later while he was trying to find another missing dog. People need to understand this is under the same rules as shooting at an airplane. Also never point a laser at a drone. Same rules apply. If convicted you will be in prison for years.

Guidelines for Neighborly Drone Use Drones are useful.

These are voluntary guidelines. No one is forcing you to obey them. Privacy is hard to define, but it is important. There is a balance between your rights as a drone user and other people's rights to privacy. That balance isn't easy to find. You should follow the detailed "UAS Privacy Best Practices", on which these guidelines are based, especially if you fly drones often, or use them commercially. The overarching principle should be peaceful issue resolution.

- Do not conduct surveillance or photograph people in areas where there is an expectation of privacy without the individual's permission. I see an issue if you hover a drone in front of a bedroom window. Also, if people have an area in their yard such as a pool deck or patio, do not make circles or hover in such areas. This is only common sense.**
- 1. If you can, tell other people you'll be taking pictures or videos of them before you do. Maybe explain about your drone or show them a picture.**
- 2. If you think someone has a reasonable expectation of privacy, don't violate that privacy by taking pictures, video, or otherwise gathering sensitive data, unless you've got a very good reason.**
- 3. Don't fly over other people's private property without permission if you can easily avoid doing so. A flight across the area is fine if just a transit from one point to another. Do not fly over people in case you have a problem to prevent injuries. Do not fly over or chase moving cars.**
- 4. If someone asks you to delete personal photos or video about him or her that you've gathered, do so, unless you've got a good reason not to.**

5. If anyone raises privacy, security, or safety concerns with you, try and listen to what they have to say, as long as they're polite and reasonable about it.
6. Don't harass people with your drone. Also do not annoy animals. It is illegal.

Fly with respect and safely.