

Fostering belonging for disabled wildlife viewers

This is worth a 90 minute training all on its own! In summary, interact with disabled wildlife viewers the same way you'd interact with nondisabled folks.

- Talk directly to the person you're trying to communicate with. Don't talk over them or to someone else. If they can't talk back to you, they will likely have another communication method to use.
- Be friendly and welcoming the same way you would for someone who doesn't have a visible disability.
- Don't touch someone without their permission. Mobility devices such as wheelchairs, walking frames and long canes are part of someone's personal space, and service dogs – when in a harness – are working, and shouldn't be patted or distracted.

Be an ally! Proactively identify and remove access barriers such as trees down over trails or door opener buttons not working. Having to advocate for your access needs all the time is exhausting, and your allyship really does make a difference.

The words we use are always evolving, and it can feel confusing to know what the best words are these days compared to 20 years ago. In general, choose words or phrases that are neutral, rather than disempowering, and avoid words that feed into stigma. If unsure, do your best, and lead with a smile. Folks will appreciate your effort, and doing something is better than doing nothing!

| Words to remove | What's the issue? | Words to use |
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| Handicapped* Impaired* | Considered by many to be outdated and offensive. | Disability Person with a disability Disabled person |
| Normal | Othering. What is "normal"? Disability is part of the human experience. | Nondisabled |
| Wheelchair-bound* Confined to a wheelchair* | Disempowering. Implies someone is trapped and constricted, when actually wheelchairs are freedom machines. | Wheelchair user |
| Special needs* | Implies the need to be able to | Autistic |

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| Note that this is often the language used in education settings. | access public places or feel welcome and included is something extra ('special'), but we all need this regardless of our disability status. | Neurodivergent |
| Fully accessible | A big claim that isn't likely to be true for all people all of the time. | Accessible Wheelchair-friendly (If it really is) |
| ADA accessible | Often used as a throw around label. Don't do it! The Americans with Disabilities Act 2010 Standards for Accessible Design need to be <i>complied with</i> ... and they don't cover trails. | ADA compliant (If you're certain it is) |
| | | Access needs Access barriers Accommodations |

*Note that these are general guidelines, but people are always allowed to identify however they like. It is never appropriate to correct or disagree with someone when they share with you how they identify.

Models of disability

Models of disability are lenses or frameworks we can use to try to understand assumptions and perceptions of people with a disability. Some of them try to reflect disabled people's experiences of interacting with the world around them.

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| Medical model of disability | Disability is something that requires treatment or curing (Ludwig, 1975). |
| Charity model of disability | Disability is something to be pitied; disabled people need help from nondisabled people (Clare, 2001). |
| Geographic model of disability | Disability is the result of built or natural physical environments around a person (Gaines, 2004). |
| Social model of disability | Disability is the responsibility of society, not the individual person, to address (Michopoulou et al., 2015). |
| Identity/affirmation model of disability | Disability is a positive aspect of an individual's identity to embrace; benefits of belonging to a community accompany this identity (Swain & French, 2000). |

Reframing disability as a strength in birding

In a survey of disabled birders, 106 respondents answered a question about any positives they'd noticed because they bird differently to others as a result of their disability (McGregor et al., in preparation for publication). 72% said they did, including that they:

- Notice more details about birds, their behavior, their habitats etc.;
- Notice more species of birds;
- Feel a sense of belonging in nature;
- Adapted their style of birding, such as doing more stationary birding and less hiking; and
- Have increased interpersonal connection.

Takeaways from this research:

- Instead of looking at a disability as taking away something from a person, or something someone cannot do, reframe disability using a strengths-based approach. Note that this does not mean using toxic positivity, or discounting the access barriers that many disabled folks experience.
- Wildlife viewing agencies should offer programs that engage with different styles of birding. Stationary birding events will be more accessible to some disabled birders than bird walks. Birding by ear workshops will build on some birders' strengths which may be overlooked by outing leaders who are not strong at birding by ear.

Once this paper is published, we'll share it on the Wildlife Viewing Toolkit website (<https://viewing.fishwild.vt.edu/>) so you can read more about these findings.

Principles of Universal Design

These are seven strategies to keep in mind when designing programming, spaces, objects etc. to ensure they are accessible and usable by the broadest number of people. (Not just 6' tall standing adults with PhDs!) They originate from the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University (1997). Examples given below are in the context of wildlife viewing.

1. Equitable use: All users can use it the same way.
 - A bird blind with viewing windows at various heights, including the height of a seated person's eyes, and a step up for shorter folks to use.
 - Using a tablet mounted to a spotting scope so that all participants of a bird outing can see the bird in the scope at the same time, regardless of their ability to look directly through a scope (which may be limited by the difficulty of maneuvering a mobility device between tripod legs).
2. Flexibility in use: There are various ways to use it successfully.

- Monoculars with threads to allow them to be hand-held, *and* allow them to attach to mounts for tripods or wheelchair attachments.
 - Wildlife viewing locations that support different styles of wildlife viewing, such as car viewing, stationary viewing areas, *and* accessible trails.
3. Simple and intuitive use: Easy to understand how to use it successfully.
 - Straightforward buttons to push for audio narration of an interpretive sign.
 - Permanent spotting scopes that use both eyes and don't require focusing.
 4. Perceptible information: Provides various methods of receiving information.
 - Visually presenting slides with text and images, talking about them, *and* providing a handout at a workshop or training session.
 - A map of a wildlife viewing location with large print, good contrast, images, a tactile component *and* braille labels.
 - Providing captions *and* audio for an orientation film.
 5. Tolerance for error: Built-in hazard reduction.
 - A braille trail with a tactile marker along the guiderope that alerts trail users to an upcoming interpretive sign or tree trunk, so they don't inadvertently slam their hand into a solid object.
 - A wide, stable shoulder along the edge of a wildlife drive so visitors pulling their vehicle off to view wildlife don't end up falling into a ditch.
 6. Low physical effort: The user can maintain a neutral body position, and it doesn't require excessive operating force to use.
 - Door opener buttons (that work!) for doors into visitor centers and bathrooms, removing the need to push or pull a heavy object.
 - Lightweight binoculars attached to a binocular harness (not a neck strap), which hold the weight of the optics closer to the user's center of gravity.
 7. Size and space for approach and use: Adequate circulation space for mobility devices, a clear line of sight, and all operable components are within a reasonable reach.
 - Observation blinds with ample space to maneuver into and around without chairs or benches in the way.
 - Exhibits in visitors centers with interactive components within easy reach of a seated or standing person. (According to the 2010 Standards for Accessible Design section 308, if there are no obstructions between the person and what they are trying to reach, or there is an obstruction that sticks out less than 20" towards the person, the interactive components should be between 15-48" from the floor.)

What comes next?

1. List three things you learned today.
 - a)

b)

c)

2. What are two steps you can take to increase accessibility in wildlife viewing in the next two months?

a)

b)

3. What barriers do you face to increasing accessibility? What can you do to work around those barriers?

| <i>Barrier</i> | <i>Possible solution</i> |
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Strong arguments to get support from management and funders

You're ready to start (or continue) the work to increase accessibility and inclusion for wildlife viewers! Alas, your management, agency and/or funders need some convincing. Here are a few arguments to offer:

- It's the right thing to do. It's as simple as that.
- We all deserve to access nature. There are so many health and wellness benefits of being in nature, and everybody should have the opportunity to enjoy these. In fact, the United Nations has declared that access to a healthy environment is a human right! (United Nations, 2021).
- It is required by federal law. The Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 states that Title II entities, which includes state and local governments, must provide equal opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in their programs and services (which include any facilities constructed for wildlife viewing).

- 1 in 4 Americans has a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). We need to ensure that a quarter of the population has access to wildlife viewing, because that is a lot of people we need supporting conservation!
- 39% of wildlife viewers have an accessibility challenge (Sinkular et al., 2022). Again, that's a huge number of folks! This isn't a tiny minority.
- Access improvements benefit lots of people. In fact, it's rare that an access improvement only benefits one population.
 - The 'curb-cut effect' (Blackwell, 2017): Curb cuts (or curb ramps) are those sloped sections of sidewalks that travel down to the surface of the road. They were originally developed for wheelchair users to be able to cross the street safely, but it turns out they benefit so many others: caregivers pushing strollers, travelers with wheeled suitcases, delivery drivers with trolleys, people riding bicycles, people pushing shopping carts...
 - Disabled wildlife viewers have family members and friends who want to get involved in activities together. When a location or a program is inaccessible to one member of the group, many more people may choose to opt out of participating too.
- We'll all be disabled at some point...! As pessimistic as that sounds, if we live long enough we'll find ourselves living with disability. Perhaps a broken leg means we need to use crutches for several weeks (temporary disabilities count!), or perhaps we'll just slow down and need more resting locations along a trail as we age. Either way, many people still want to enjoy wildlife viewing regardless of their age!

Resources

- Wildlife viewing toolkit website (<https://viewing.fishwild.vt.edu/>) has links to many resources to help you further, including the ones listed below. You can also find our contact information there.
- Literature review: coming! We are developing a summary of the literature about disabled wildlife viewers to help you in this work. It should be available via the Wildlife viewing toolkit website by May, 2024.
- Disability-related language best practices are available from the National Center on Disability and Journalism's Disability Language Style Guide: <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>
- ADA Coordinator(s) at your state agency should be familiar with the Americans with Disabilities Act 2010 Standards for Accessible Design and other resources to help you plan and implement more accessible and inclusive wildlife viewing.
- Your regional ADA Center has lots of resources. Find your center here: <https://adata.org/find-your-region>
- Local birding groups, including Audubon chapters, bird clubs and other

community nature groups very likely include members with disabilities. As more members of the birding community learn about and work towards a more accessible and inclusive environment, there may be the opportunity to collaborate with these organizations to co-host programming etc.

- Local disability organizations, including Centers for Independent Living, Lighthouses for the Blind, and adaptive sports groups can be great venues to connect and collaborate with disabled people in your community, and share programming opportunities to help get the words out.
- If you need disability statistics for a grant etc., check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website:
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html> Another resource is the Disability Compendium:
<https://disabilitycompendium.org/>

Want to stay in touch? Please scan this QR code (or visit: <http://tinyurl.com/WVNT24>) to sign up for email updates about accessibility and wildlife viewing from Virginia Tech.



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