Increasing access and inclusion for wildlife-related recreationists with disabilities:
Research and resources to support your efforts

AFWA National Meeting, September 2024

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Welcome!

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Nature Tourism Manager
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Chair, Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Working Group

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PhD Student

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Today's presentation

Intros and setting the scene
(15 mins)

Supporting inclusion of disabled wildlife viewers
(40 mins)

Creating accessible wildlife viewing opportun-ities
(45 mins)

Allyship best practices
(10 mins)

Resources to support change-making
(10 mins)

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Setting the scene

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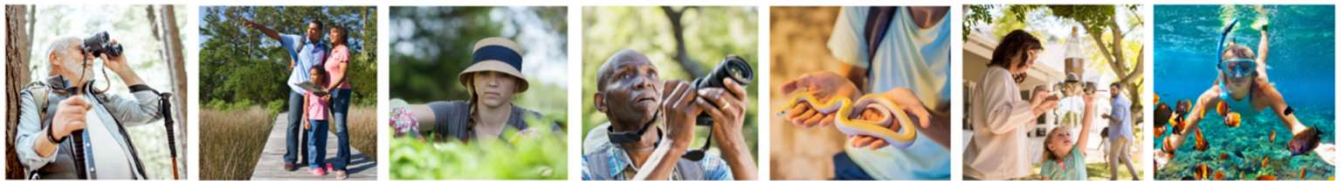The Dayer Human Dimensions Lab has been partnering with the Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Working Group since 2020!

5

What is wildlife viewing?

"Closely **observing, feeding, and photographing** wildlife; **visiting parks or natural areas** to observe, feed, or photograph wildlife; and **maintaining plantings and natural areas** for the benefit of wildlife."

(US DOI et al., 2016)

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How do wildlife viewers benefit state agencies?

Purchasing **products** that **benefit wildlife** or whose proceeds support conservation

Donating money to support conservation

Collecting **data** on **wildlife** or habitat

Participating in civic **engagement**

Enhancing wildlife **habitat**
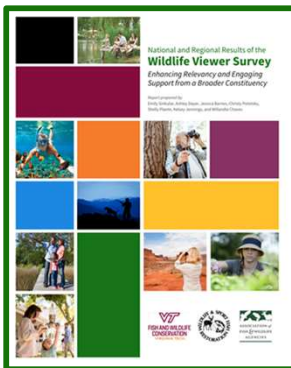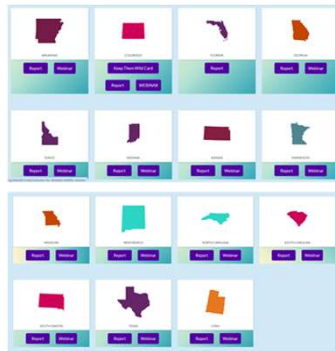
(Cherry, 2018; Cooper et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2021)

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Resources we have developed about wildlife viewers:

National and regional results from a nationwide survey of wildlife viewers

4,030 total respondents

State-specific reports about these results for 15 states

Report about 17,000+ urban/rural wildlife viewers

Links to these resources: viewing.fishwild.vt.edu/

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What does it mean to have a disability?

Disability: "A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities".

May impact someone's:

- Mobility
- Cognition
- Hearing
- Vision
- Ability to live alone, and/or
- Self-care (bathing or dressing).

(ADA National Network, 2023)

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Resources about disabled wildlife viewers:
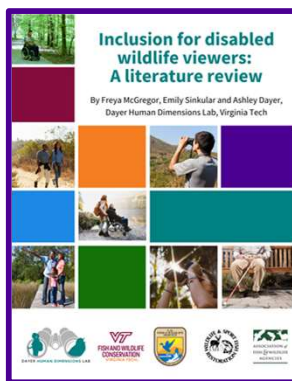
Literature review about access and inclusion of disabled wildlife viewers

Research paper about barriers and facilitators for disabled birders

Webinar recordings on these topics

Links to these resources: viewing.fishwild.vt.edu/inclusion-for-disabled-wildlife-viewers

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Focus groups generating recommendations

32 disabled and neurodivergent wildlife viewers from all four of the AFWA regions across the U.S.
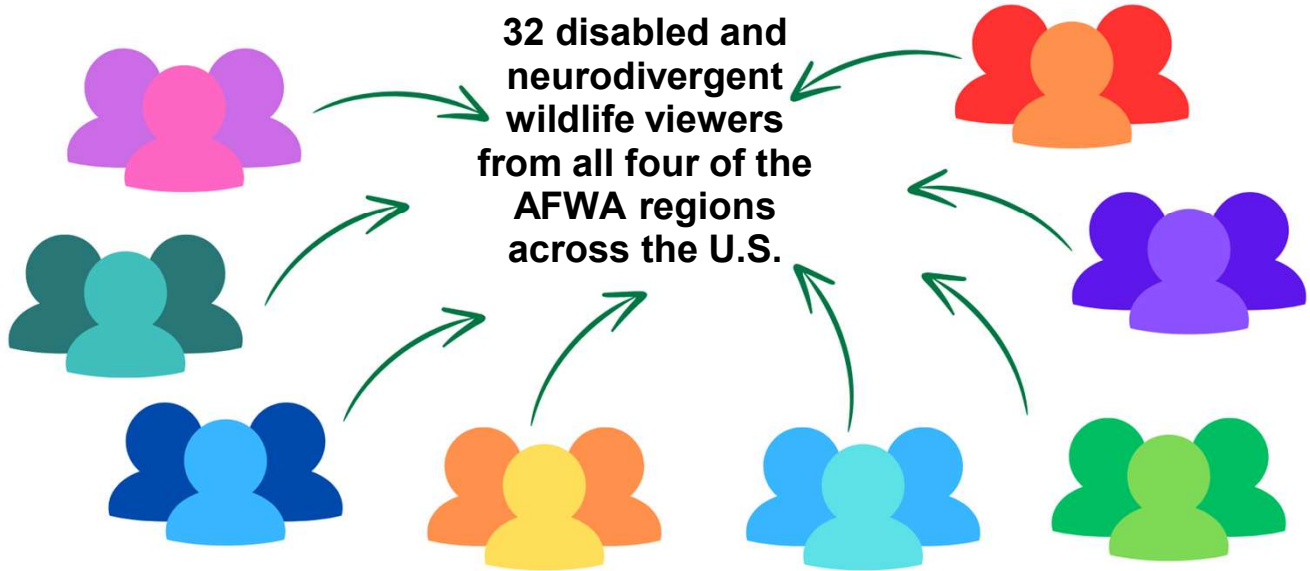
11

"There's something distinctly American about 'disability only means certain things'. **Disability can be so many other things!** I'm also a cancer survivor. I have been disabled for over a decade, but I've only been visibly disabled for four years. Cancer is a disability; going through treatment is a disability. You can't necessarily see that on somebody. **It's not all wheelchairs and canes.**"

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Why should state agencies care about increasing access and inclusion for disabled wildlife viewers?

1. Enter the Padlet using the QR code.
2. Brainstorm using sticky notes.
   This is anonymous!
3. Large group debrief after 5 minutes.

Scan the QR code or visit
https://tinyurl.com/mrxb5e48

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How common is disability in the U.S.?

1 in 4
Americans have a disability.

(Centers for Disease Control, 2020)

1 in 50
Americans have a diagnosed mental health condition.

(Mental Health America, 2022)

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How many wildlife viewers experience accessibility challenges?

39%

n = 1,556
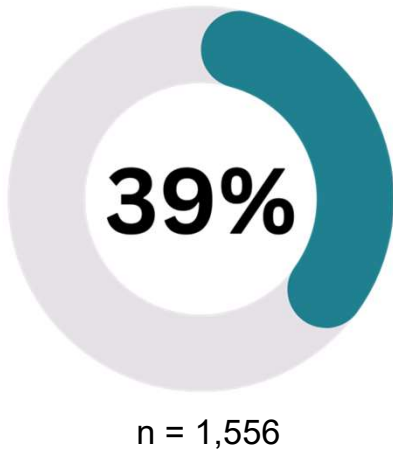
Of wildlife viewers reported having *somewhat*, *quite a bit*, or *a great deal* of accessibility challenges when wildlife viewing.

(Sinkular et al., 2022)

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What about hunters and anglers?

43%

n = 795

Of hunter-angler-viewers reported having *somewhat*, *quite a bit*, or *a great deal* of accessibility challenges when wildlife viewing.

(Sinkular et al., 2022)

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Agencies and organizations
must ensure that
**people with disabilities
have equal opportunities**
to participate in
all programs they offer.

(Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990)

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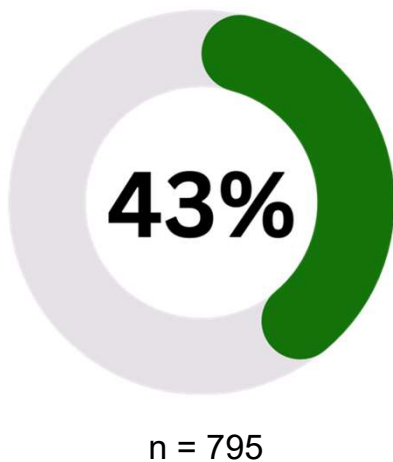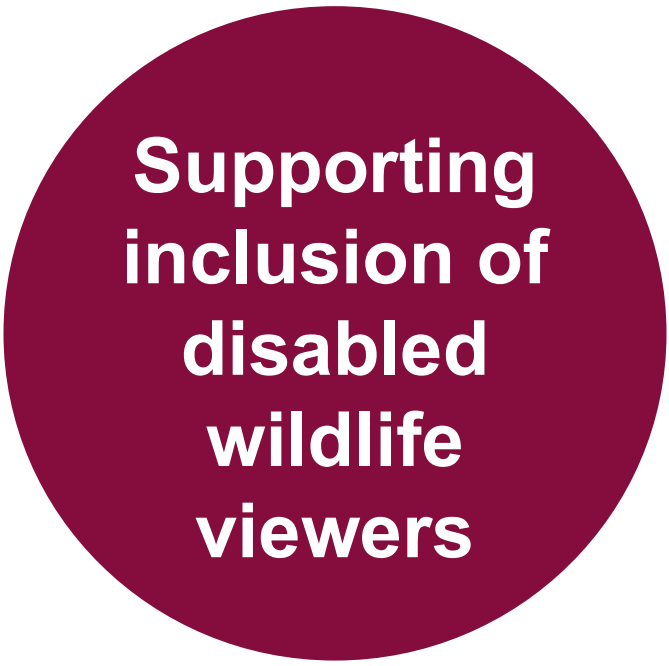**Supporting inclusion of disabled wildlife viewers**

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What is the difference between the ADA and inclusion of people with disabilities?

Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990:

- Federal civil rights law to prevent discrimination.
- State/local governments and businesses must comply.
- 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design:
    - Covers buildings, parking areas, recreation facilities.
    - Does not cover hiking trails.
      → A trail cannot be "ADA accessible" or "ADA compliant".

(U.S. Department of Justice, 1990; ADA National Network, 2023)

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What is the difference between the ADA and inclusion of people with disabilities?

Inclusion: An active and ongoing effort to **intentionally welcome** and **incorporate** people of diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

- The social and cultural environment: how people interact with each other.
- Just because an entity complies with the ADA does not mean someone with a disability will feel included there.

Photo: Freya McGregor.

(The George Washington University, n.d.)

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"One thing that I like to share as advice for people who want to be inclusive, but don't know where to start is to **think about the most vulnerable person that they know** and think about if their program or place is accessible to them."

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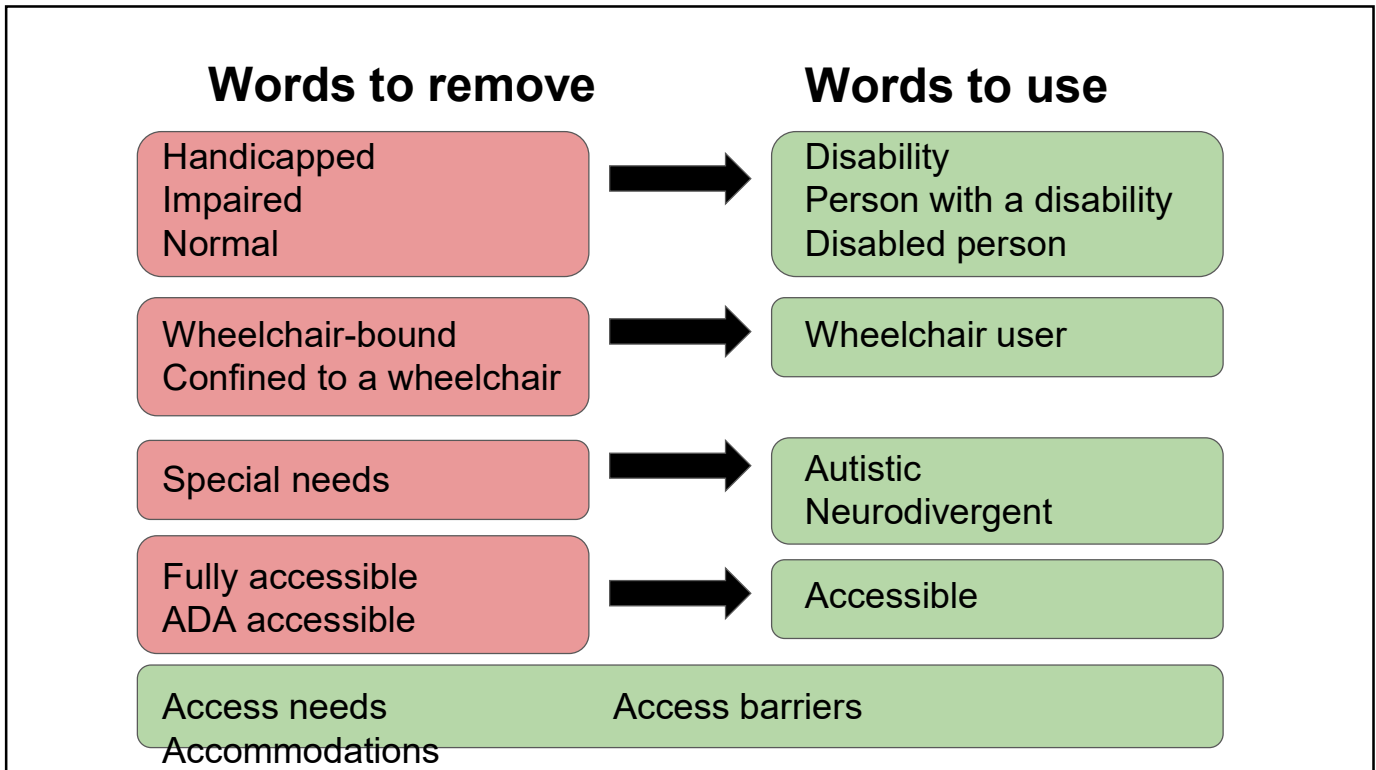# Basic disability etiquette

- Interact with people with disabilities the same way you interact with nondisabled folks:
  - Talk directly to the person;
  - Be friendly and welcoming; and
  - Don't touch someone or help them without their permission.

- Be an ally! Proactively identify and remove access barriers.

- Use words that are neutral. Avoid words that are disempowering or that feed into stigma.

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Words to remove → Words to use

Words to remove	Words to use
Handicapped Impaired Normal	Disability Person with a disability Disabled person
Wheelchair-bound Confined to a wheelchair	Wheelchair user
Special needs	Autistic Neurodivergent
Fully accessible ADA accessible	Accessible
Access needs Accommodations	Access barriers

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**On being humble
as an inclusion practice**

"**Don't assume.** Be curious about things that you might not understand or might not have considered 'disability'. Instead of trying to know everything, just **ask open ended questions about what people need**, so that there can be an opportunity [to share, and to learn]. You can't try to anticipate everything about disability. But you can be curious and ask questions about how you can help somebody **instead of trying to be prescriptive**."

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How do we ensure programs are inclusive for people with disabilities?

Staff and volunteers educated on
disability inclusion, including:
- Viewing disabled people as
  "a normal person"
- Cultural humility
- Disability-related language
- Modifying the program or activity
- Soft skills, e.g. patience

(Anderson & Heyne, 2000; Chikuta et al., 2018, p.9; Schleien et al., 1997; Armstrong et al., 2022)

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**On being inclusive when
you don't know how:**

"Just creating **an environment where you feel like you can communicate like your needs** would be super helpful. Like having a contact person beforehand that you can be like, "This is something I can do, this is something I can't." Making sure things are gonna work for the most amount of people, and just considering [that] **everybody's different**."

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How do we ensure programs are inclusive for people with disabilities?

- Hold wildlife viewing programs at locations:
  - Serviced by public transportation
  - Physically accessible
- Modify wildlife viewing programs by:
  - Building in more breaks
  - Moving at a slower pace
  - Creating stationary viewing opportunities
- Provide accurate information about the program's and location's accessibility.

(James et al., 2018; Karns et al., 2023; Schleien et al., 1997; Brown, 2017)

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On breaking up program participants into groups of 5-10:

"That's really helpful, so that you get that **one-on-one attention**. But also it makes it to where [program staff] can **modify the curriculum, or the activity**, or go slower, or whatever is needed for the needs of the participant. 'Cause when you're in a larger group, if you have a need that separates you from the group, you're generally just not participating anymore."

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How do we ensure programs are inclusive for people with disabilities?

- Co-design programs
    - → Increased engagement
- Build relationships and then "provide conditions so they can grow themselves"
    - Network with disability organizations
    - Develop an advisory board of disabled wildlife users

(Charlton, 1998; National Recreation and Park Association, 2018; Sutton-Long et al., 2016; Schleien et al., 1997)

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Personal reflection

Worksheet (10 minutes)
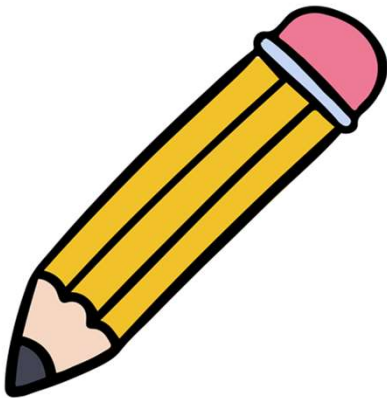
30

Personal reflection

Worksheet (10 minutes)

Padlet group discussion (10 minutes)
https://tinyurl.com/4szc72tx
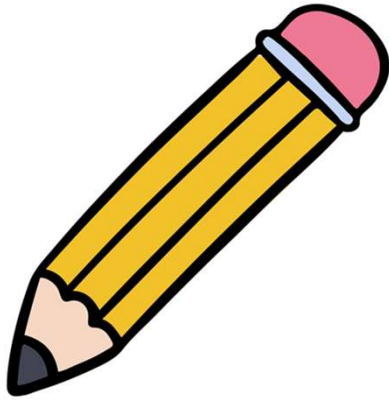
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Creating accessible wildlife viewing opportunities

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What are the personal barriers to wildlife viewing with a disability?

- Lack of:
  - Time
  - Money
  - Equipment
  - Knowledge of where to go

*Not always within someone's control.

Photo: Patrick Oaks.

(Sinkular et al., 2024; Karns et al., 2023)

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What are the interpersonal barriers to wildlife viewing with a disability?

- Lack of someone to go with
- Lack of other people supporting them to go
- Negative attitudes of others
- Crowds
- Safety concerns

(Sinkular et al., 2024; Karns et al., 2023)

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Lack of accessible features create barriers to wildlife viewing with a disability

- Accessible trails
- Information about features
- Obstacles, eg. bollards, boulders, gates
- Benches/rest areas
- Accessible bathrooms
- Accessible parking
- Accessible public transport

Photo: Freya McGregor.

(Darcy, 2006; Dippenaar & Kotze, 2005; Karns et al., 2023; Mahmoudzadeh & Kourdi Sarjaz, 2018; Schahfer & Robison, n.d.; Sinkular et al., 2024;)

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On providing detailed information ahead of time

"Honestly, just **asking people to communicate their needs** is the biggest thing, **instead of assuming that you've already got it covered**."

"I'd be going on that trip! Wow, to have that information ahead of time is more likely that **I'll follow through and actually go** instead of get that reservation in the morning that says 'I don't know if I'm just right enough today for that'. And 'what if?'"

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What are the programming barriers to wildlife viewing with a disability?

- Staff lacking an understanding of disability
- Lack of inclusive programming
- Lack of wheelchair accessible tour vehicles
- Lack of awareness of the impacts of intersectionality

Photo: Freya McGregor.

(Dippenaar & Kotze, 2005; Ghimire et al., 2014; Green et al., 2009; Karns et al., 2023; Sinkular et al., 2024.)

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What would make wildlife viewing more accessible for people with disabilities?
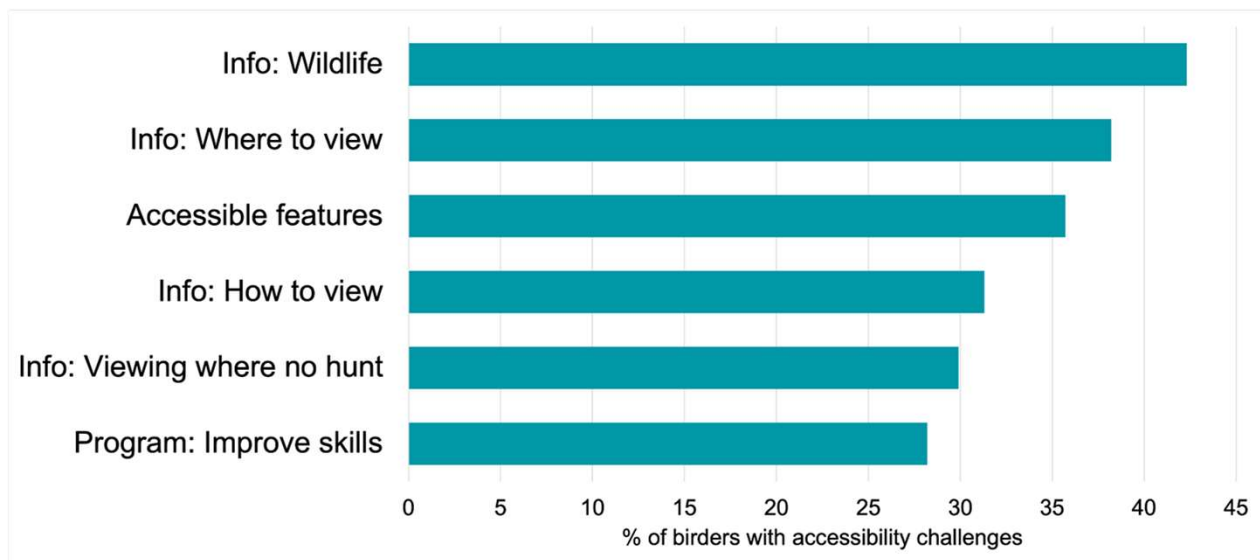
(Sinkular, et al., 2024)

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What would make wildlife viewing more accessible for people with disabilities?
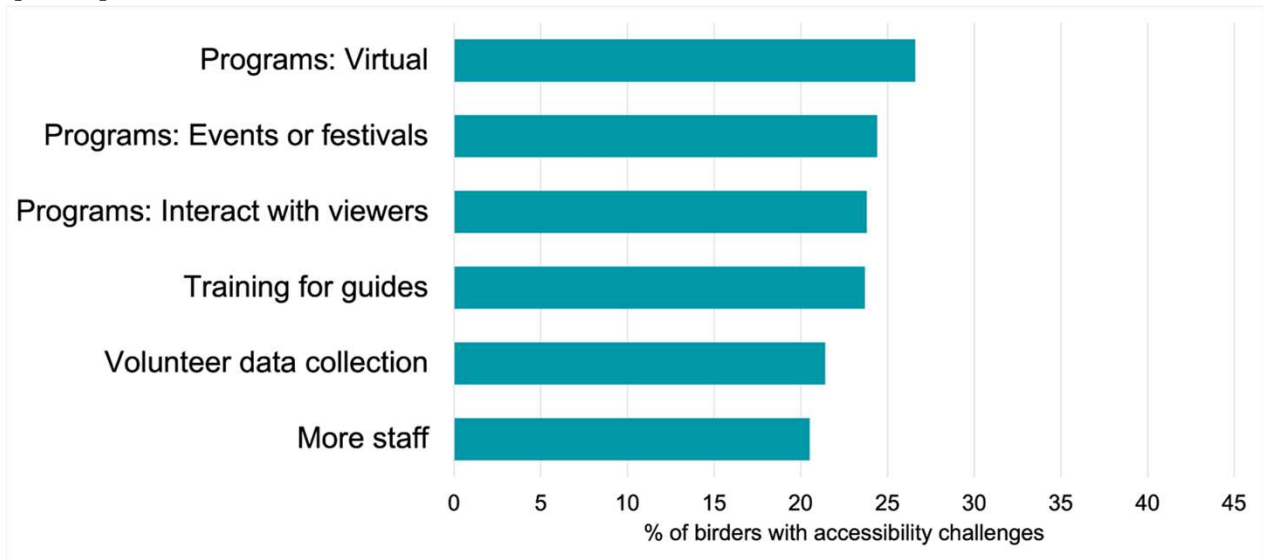
(Sinkular, et al., 2024)

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How should we design trails for people with disabilities?

- Surfaces: Firm, stable and slip-resistant.
- Length: Any.
- Width: 36-48".
- Slope: Up to 5%.
- Cross slope: No steeper than 2%.
- Benches: Every 150-200'.

Photo: Freya McGregor.

(United States Access Board, 2014; Parks Canada, 1994; Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, 2023.)

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What are the best practices for designing accessible interpretive signs?

Largest font size possible for layout

Main points understood in 45 seconds of reading

Strong contrast between text and background colors
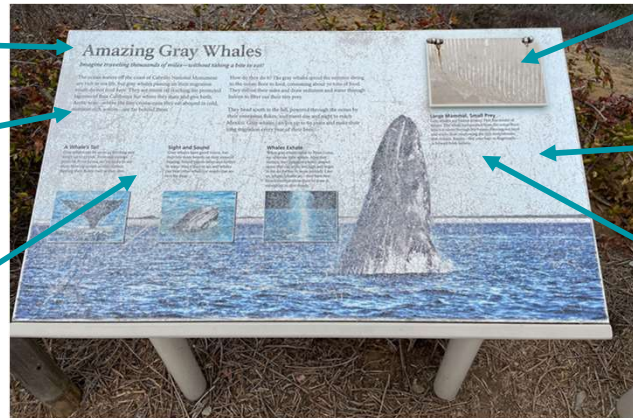
Provide information in alternative formats

Not a white background (it creates glare)

Text left justified

Use plain language

Sans serif fonts

Photo: Freya McGregor.

(ADA Standards for Accessible Design, 2010; National Park Service, 2009 and 2017; Parks Canada, 1994; Smithsonian Institution, no date.)

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How do we best communicate with people with disabilities when marketing programs?

- Use up-to-date disability-related language
- In any written communication use plain language:

  - Using headings
  - Organize content logically
  - Write short paragraphs
  - Write short sentences
  - Choose familiar words

  - Avoid jargon
  - Remove unnecessary words
  - Use lists to break up text
  - Use bold text (not ALL CAPS) if you need to emphasize

(Federal Plain Language Guidelines, 2011.)

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How do we best communicate with people with disabilities when marketing programs?

- Include disabled wildlife viewers in your marketing materials.
- Explicitly welcome people with disabilities and who are neurodivergent to participate.
- Follow best practices for visual accessibility of any graphics.
- Ensure websites follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE
Many benches dot the trail to provide rest stops along your journey. You will find the distance to the next bench clearly displayed.

WHEELCHAIRS AND STROLLERS WELCOME
This trail is constructed with a hard-packed surface and is six feet wide to allow wheelchairs and strollers to pass one another safely without displacing anyone from their path.

Photo: Freya McGregor.
(Schahfer & Robinson, n.d.)

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How do we best communicate with people with disabilities when marketing programs?

For programs held on trails, include:
- Contact information
- Parking and public transport availability
- Availability of toilets and drinking water
- Trail surface, width, maximum and average gradient and cross slope
- Frequency of benches/resting areas
- Obstacles
- Any other trail users

Photo: Freya McGregor.

(Access Recreation, 2013)

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For all programs:

"**Provide basic guidelines about what to expect**: what to expect with weather, what to expect physically, whether or not you can leave early, whether or not it's an out and back. Things like that are really helpful for planning for what I need to bring, if my partner has to be with me, decisions I need to make before I'm there. **If events don't have enough of that information… it's really hard for me to commit to it.**
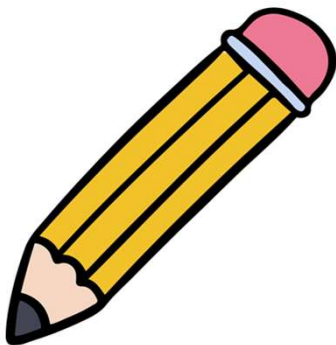
"If it's a high pain day… that could **make it impossible without having [this information]** to know whether or not this is going to be safe for me to do, possible for me to do, enjoyable for me to do."

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Small group discussion

- Group with others from your agency/organization
- Worksheet (10 minutes)

Padlet group discussion (10 minutes)
(Yes, it's the same Padlet we already used!)

https://padlet.com/freyamcgregor/increasing-access-and-inclusion-for-wildlife-related-recreat-rwybdx9jrcsf9m7q

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Allyship best practices

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How can we practice allyship to disabled wildlife viewers?

Allyship: Actively and intentionally **supporting**, uplifting and **advocating** for a person or **group that you do not belong to**, often **using your privilege** to help dismantle systems of oppression and promote social change.

Allyship pushes back against the "poor, tragic disabled people" narrative.

Photo: Freya McGregor.

(Kutlaca & Radke, 2022; Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2023.)

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How can organizations practice allyship to disabled wildlife viewers?

- Use up-to-date language around disability.
- Provide accessibility features proactively, not reactively.
- Develop a Code of Conduct on expected behavior. Uphold it.
- Co-design programs with the disability community.
  - Ask how you can support, rather than assuming you know.
  - Share the community's own work, rather than rephrasing it.
- Introduce disability organizations to your networks and resources.
- Learn how to apologize without being defensive.
- Keep learning! Allyship is a journey, not a destination.

  (National Recreation and Park Association, 2018; Phillips & Bledsoe, 2021; Sutton-Long et al., 2016.)

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Preliminary recommendations from our focus groups

→ Provide detailed information about **all trails and programs** when sharing about them: online, on maps, at trailheads, in marketing materials.

Photos: Freya McGregor.

→ Start working on a plan <u>now</u> to fund a disabled outdoor accessibility expert to gather detailed information about all trails and programs, and fund the cost of installing signage and updating websites to share this.

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Preliminary recommendations from our focus groups

→ Include a question in all event registration forms asking what access needs participants have.
  → Do your best to meet them.

→ At the beginning of programs, invite all participants to share any access needs they have that would be helpful for them if others knew about.

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Problem

"Because I have a **service dog**, in my local community I don't feel very well supported. I'm a member of the Audubon Society, but it's not a group where I'm particularly comfortable, because many of them have stated in the field… 'You shouldn't be here with your dog' or 'Your dog shouldn't come', or 'You can't have pets'... **People don't understand**, especially with more widespread use of [emotional support] dogs and then people abusing that… it seems to **bring on a lot of hostility** when you're somewhere."

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Preliminary recommendations from our focus groups

→ Use signage at visitor centers, trailheads etc that:

- Welcomes service dogs, <u>and</u>
- Clarifies how they are different from pets and emotional support animals.

→ Use similar language in event descriptions and at the beginning of programs, too.

Photos: Freya McGregor.

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Impact

"I never once got stopped that day… and I didn't have anybody walk by saying, 'I can't believe that lady'. I'm sensitive, because I want to go out there and I want to be invisible, but I'm not. **It's really helpful not to be challenged**, and for signs not to just say, 'No pets, no bicycles'. Because my dog's not a pet.

"I think if it was addressed at the beginning… or wherever the other signs are, just like [wildlife viewing location] did it. I was just so jazzed that **they actually took the time** to realize how they're helping the public and the person and the experience. **I was just like everybody else that day.** Nobody noticed [me]."
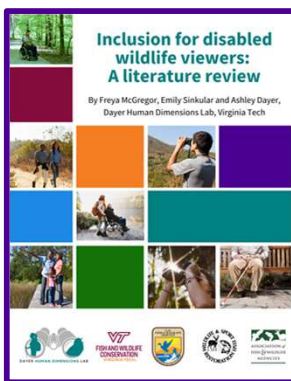
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Resources to support change-making

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Resources about disabled wildlife viewers

Literature review about access and inclusion of disabled wildlife viewers

Research paper about barriers and facilitators for disabled birders

Webinar recordings on these topics

Links to these resources: viewing.fishwild.vt.edu/inclusion-for-disabled-wildlife-viewers

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What's next?

During the AFWA National Meeting:
- Wednesday September 25, 8am-10am: 45 minute co-production of recommendations workshop as part of the Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Working Group meeting.

This project:
- Report summarizing our findings/recommendations.
- Webinar to share these results.

AFWA Multistate Conservation Grant in 2025…?
- Develop a playbook to help state agencies replicate prime examples of disability access and inclusion

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Going forward

"**You have to be dynamic about it, because disability is dynamic.** Not all of us are just wheelchair users, or born with limb difference. A lot of us come into disability at different times, and it's a process to accept it as well. **People who might need your help might not identify as disabled yet.**

"I wish people knew that: there are people who need your help who might not have a diagnosis, who might not know what to ask for yet, and so it is helpful to offer things and to try to know the answers. But **don't assume you have all the answers**, because it would be an impossibly long handbook."

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Thank you!

Questions?
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- Ashley: dayer@vt.edu

Want more information?
https://viewing.fishwild.vt.edu/

Scan this QR code or visit http://tinyurl.com/WVNT24 to sign up for email updates about our research:

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