



Wisconsin Council of the  
Blind & Visually Impaired

## **Birding Field Trips for All:**

Recommendations for maximizing inclusiveness and  
accessibility outdoors

By Madison Audubon and  
Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired

Birding field trips allow individuals from all walks of life to experience, learn about, and care for nature first-hand. Maximizing the inclusiveness of the trips is essential for ensuring all attendees can participate fully. Madison Audubon and the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired have created the following guidelines to help field trip leaders feel confident in serving all attendees and delivering the most accessible trip possible.

### **Definitions.**

Let's assume a spectrum of vision abilities. Individuals who experience blindness are those who have little or no functional eyesight. Maybe they have light perception or can see movement very close to the eyes or maybe they see nothing.

On the other end of the spectrum are fully sighted individuals, who experience 20/20 vision.

There are many whose vision falls between these two ends of the spectrum and represent a wide range of visual abilities. Some are legally blind. They have visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better-seeing eye with best correction or a visual field of 20 degrees or less. Visual acuity of 20/200 means what the individual sees at a 20-foot distance is what a fully sighted person can see at 200 feet away.

Some are considered to have low vision. If visual acuity is around 20/70 and cannot be corrected by eyeglasses or medical intervention, the individual is said to have low vision.

Many individuals on this spectrum have useable, functional vision. Some you would not recognize as having a vision difference.

### **Types of vision.**

- Tunnel vision – loss of peripheral vision and possessing a clear inner space. Many conditions can result in tunnel vision. A common condition is glaucoma. An hereditary disorder like retinitis pigmentosa may cause tunnel vision and the visual field may get smaller over time and lead to blindness. With tunnel vision, it takes a longer time to find the desired object like a tree branch or bird because visual scanning is necessary.
- Dark spots – possessing a dark spot in some part of your vision. If the dark spot affects central vision, eyesight can lose detail and color. Dark spots can be big or small, and follow where the person is looking. They can worsen with

conditions like macular degeneration or diabetes. Individuals with dark spots tend to have islands of sight and some peripheral vision (which lack detail receptors), so they can find their way around big objects but have trouble with detail such as noting the guide in a group of people or viewing a bird image in a guidebook.

- Blurry vision – appearing to look through wax paper. Someone with significant cataracts would have this level of vision. Cataracts come on slowly so some people don't realize their vision is changing. Individuals with this sight level can experience tripping if surface isn't level and predictable, or reduced vision due to glare.
- Field cut – affecting the visual pathways of the brain rather than the eyes themselves. Field cuts can result from head injury, stroke, etc. and can block half or quarter of the visual field. Depending on the field cut, an individual may not see an object to the side, not notice birds in the canopy, or miss a change in elevation on the pathway.

## **Top 10 Recommendations for birding trip leaders.**

1. Focus on the context. Being aware of the habitat, time of day, time of year, and other sounds helps narrow down which kinds of birds you'll listen for and hear.
2. Use mnemonics that help you remember the calls, come up with your own, and know the more common ones. If not the word-phrase mnemonics (e.g., "ee-oh-lay"), then encourage people to think of what the call reminds them

of (i.e., “squeaky wheel,” “truck backing up,” “light saber”).

3. Listen for all the qualities of sound (e.g., pitch, timbre, quality, length, and repetition) to remember or trigger memory. Tap out rhythm on hand to create physical memory of pattern.
4. Keep the chatter down, especially when topics are non-related. Unrelated noise can be very distracting for people who are focusing on sounds.
5. Only play recorded calls or songs on your phone when requested and/or announced.
6. Stop movement when you start talking about birds so attendees don't have to pay attention to both the walk way or their sighted guide and also what you're discussing or pointing out.
7. Use clock-descriptors to identify the location of the bird, and say in the canopy or close to the ground, or twice the height of a person, to help describe angle and height.
8. Describe the bird. Does it fit in your hand or is it the size of football or as wide as your shoulders, what color is it, what unusual behaviors are we observing (i.e., a bobbing long tail).
9. Light matters a lot to individuals with visual impairments, particularly because sun glare and changing light levels (in and out of tree shade) can be very confusing and

make walking difficult. You may need to use a slower pace, and know some attendees may not be able to see the bird in a brighter spot because of the glare.

- As a general approach at the beginning of any class, ask “are there any accommodations I can make to meet any needs you may have to help you have an enjoyable experience?” or suggest individuals with visual impairments approach you later if desired. It is okay to ask the individual to describe their visual difference to help you tailor the experience. It is not okay to ask for specific medical information.

Bonus tip: Announce problematic plants or other hazards near or on the trail (good for all attendees, regardless of sightedness!).

### **Resources for practice or ideas.**

Outta Sight tournament for blind birders in the Rio Grande Valley, TX (18 minutes):

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHxCKWIZwq4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHxCKWIZwq4)

University of Michigan Dearborn Birding by Ear:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MZZaXhvwAA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MZZaXhvwAA)

Speaking Out For the Blind with Donna Posont:

[acbradio.org/sites/default/files/archives/shows/speaking-out-for-the-blind/sob41.mp3](http://acbradio.org/sites/default/files/archives/shows/speaking-out-for-the-blind/sob41.mp3)

Mnemonics list:

[web.stanford.edu/~kendric/birds/birdsong.html](http://web.stanford.edu/~kendric/birds/birdsong.html)

All About Birds: [www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org)

National Audubon Society stories about birding by ear:

[www.audubon.org/birding-by-ear](http://www.audubon.org/birding-by-ear)

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