

## Inclusive Communication and Language Use Tips

Language, and the words we choose to use, is powerful. You can include (or exclude) someone just by using the wrong word. And if you are not feeling comfortable about which word to use, you can feel awkward... which makes it awkward for the person you're interacting with too.

Clear, inclusive, appropriate, inoffensive language is important, and if agreed upon and used broadly can help everyone understand and feel included. Below are some suggestions of which words to use, and which words to avoid. Generally, person-first, enabling language is preferred. Describe someone as "a person who is blind or has low vision", rather than "a blind person". State that someone is a "wheelchair user" (ie, a person who uses a wheelchair to get around), rather than saying they are "wheelchair bound" (which can imply that without a wheelchair they can do nothing... which is almost never accurate).

Don't use words that 'feel more polite' but are actually avoiding the reality of the situation (and often seen as patronizing), such as 'differently abled', 'handi-capable' or 'special needs'. Most people are aware of their ability or disability, so it's OK to say it out loud! Think of it like hair color – saying, "your hair is brown" is hardly offensive. But squirming and making it awkward as you try to find an alternative 'more polite' way to say it ("Your hair is a darker blonde?" "Your hair is a lovely shade of pale black?") just makes everyone uncomfortable.

There are many groups of people who experience accessibility challenges in the physical, social or cultural environments that prevent them from going birding, and such a diverse group of people will not always agree on everything. That's OK! This list is just a starting point; if you're unsure, best practice is to ask the person (or people) what term they would prefer you use, and use that. (Usually their own name is what they'd prefer to be called!) Their preference overrides whatever is on this list.

- **Accessibility challenges:** The difficulties someone experiences in interacting with or while using the physical or social environment while trying to engage in a meaningful activity (in this case, birding!). This may be a result of a mobility challenge, blindness or low vision, intellectual or developmental disabilities (including autism), mental illness, being Deaf or Hard of Hearing or other health concern, however often it is the *environment* – rather than the *person* – who is disabled. Best used to describe a person as "someone who experiences accessibility challenges". (Note: accessibility challenges may also be related to factors such as someone's race or skin color, financial barriers, or lack of available transportation; and many birders who experience accessibility challenges may also experience other barriers such as these that impact their ability to go birding.)

- **People with mobility challenges:** Includes anyone who has some difficulties walking or otherwise mobilizing. This includes people who are wheelchair users; people who use crutches, walking frames or mobility devices; people with injuries or grumpy joints; (sometimes) people who use lower limb prosthetics; and people with movement or balance disorders. It also (sometimes) includes older people, parents with young children... and (more than likely) our future selves...!
- **Birding vs bird watching:** ‘Birding’ is the preferred verb, as it does not imply only using one’s eyes, but includes all birders who bird by ear, whether they are blind or have low vision or are sighted.
- **Bird walk vs bird outing:** ‘Bird outing’ is the preferred term, as this includes all kinds of birding, such as birding in a bird blind, birding from the car, and birding that otherwise does not involve the act of walking. (However, many birders who cannot walk may still use the phrase ‘bird walk’ to describe a particular kind of bird outing.)
- **Disability:** Any physical, cognitive or mental diagnosis, condition, illness, injury or otherwise that impacts someone’s ability to do a particular activity; in this case, go birding as they would like. May be temporary (eg. during recovery from surgery), intermittent (eg. fatigue as a result of a flare up episode of multiple sclerosis) or permanent (eg. spinal cord injury).
- **Able-bodied:** Someone who does not have a disability.
- **Normal:** Avoid if you’re talking about someone without a disability. (What is “normal”, anyway?) Instead, use able-bodied, sighted, neurotypical, or all of the above.
- **Invisible disability:** Not all disabilities or health conditions have an outward sign of their presence. You won’t necessarily be able to identify by sight birders who have conditions like chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia or lupus, for example, but many of these birders may experience accessibility challenges. Other diagnosis such as Autism or mental illnesses may have no outward signs either. Keeping an open, inclusive, welcoming attitude may help birders disclose some of their story to you, but don’t assume all birders can hike fast or won’t need that promised five minute rest break during your bird outing.
- **Handicapped:** These days used only to describe an inanimate object, such as a parking space, but not a person.
- **Differently-abled:** Avoid.
- **People with physical challenges:** Includes people who have some kind of difficulty moving in any way. This may include anything from difficulty walking (aka mobility), or difficulty using their left hand. Best to avoid in the context of Birdability, as it is unclear and not inclusive.

- **Impairments; impaired:** No longer in common use; often feels uncomfortable to the people you may be describing. Use 'low vision' rather than 'vision impaired', for example.
- **Barriers:** Any obstacle, physical, social or cultural, that prevents someone from doing something they would like to. May be a physical barrier such as a downed log on a trail preventing a birder who uses a wheelchair from continuing along the trail; or a cultural barrier (or taboo) which says (falsely!) that people with disabilities should not go outside.
- **Totally blind:** Someone who has no light perception.
- **Legally blind:** Used by the government to determine if someone can legally drive or receive certain benefits. In the US, visual acuity must be less than 20/200 in the better seeing eye or the visual field must be less than 20°. People who are legally blind are not always totally blind.
- **Low vision:** Cannot be corrected with glasses or surgery; historically the phrase 'vision impaired' was used. Not the same as being *blind*. The technical definition of low vision is visual acuity of 20/70 or poorer in the better seeing eye.
- **Vision impaired/vision impairment:** No longer used to describe someone who is totally blind, legally blind or has an eye condition (progressive or congenital) which causes low vision. Use the phrase 'blind or has low vision'. Avoid words like 'unsighted'.
- **Sighted:** Describes someone who is not blind or has low vision.
- **Words and phrases like "see you later":** People who are blind or have low vision understand what you mean by phrases like this, even if they are totally blind and will not, in fact, see you later. This is not considered offensive or insensitive; just use your natural language choices and everyone will feel more comfortable!
- **Deaf or Hard of Hearing:** Used by the Deaf community (with a capital "D" and "H") as their preferred description.
- **Intellectual or Developmental Disability (I/DD or IDD):** An umbrella term used to describe a range of disabilities. This covers a really large population, and like any other person, every individual will be different and have different needs and experiences.
  - **Intellectual disabilities:** Impacts someone's intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. They may (or may not) have some difficulties with communication skills, performing everyday activities, or understanding or applying social skills.
  - **Developmental disabilities:** Cause intellectual and/or physical impairments in functioning before the age of 22. Diagnostically, Autism is considered a developmental disability.

- **Autism/Autistic:** Some people who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (which includes people who have Asperger’s Syndrome) refer to themselves as “having Autism”, “being on the Spectrum”, “having ASD” or “being Autistic”. This varies person-to-person, so best to ask them what they prefer, or follow their lead.
- **Neurotypical:** Someone who doesn’t have Autism Spectrum Disorder.
  
- **Birdability Map:** The crowd-sourced, clickable map with information on the accessibility of local trails. It relies on birders to complete a Birdability Review to populate the Map. Can be found at [Audubon.org/birdability](https://audubon.org/birdability)
- **Birdability Review:** The easy-to-use survey of accessible features of a birding trail or site, which populates the Birdability Map. Found at [audubon.org/birdability](https://audubon.org/birdability)