



## Inclusive Birdability 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 with a vision impairment”, rather than “a visually impaired 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 birdwatching, 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 trumps whatever is on this list.

- **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 have a vision impairment 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.)
- **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 disability, illness, injury, medical condition 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.)

- **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. (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.
- **Differently-abled:** Avoid.
- **Handicapped:** These days used only to describe an inanimate object, such as a parking space, but not a person.
- **People with mobility challenges:** Includes anyone who has some difficulties walking. This includes people who are wheelchair users; people who use crutches, walking frames or other gait aids; (sometimes) people with lower limb prosthetics; and people with movement or balance disorders.
- **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:** Problems in body structure or function that creates a significant deviation from ‘normal’ or a loss of function.
- **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.
- **Vision impaired/vision impairment:** Used to describe anyone who is totally blind, legally blind or has an eye condition (progressive or congenital) which causes low vision. Avoid words like ‘unsighted’.
- **Sighted:** Describes someone who does not have a vision impairment.
- **Words and phrases like “see you later”:** People with vision impairments understand what you mean by phrases like this, even if they are totally blind and will not, in fact, see you later. Usually, 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.
- **Autism:** 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 practice is to use person-first language (“someone who has Autism”) unless they describe themselves as being Autistic.
- **Neurotypical:** Someone who doesn’t have Autism Spectrum Disorder.