

Inclusive language use and communication tips

Language, and the words we use, are powerful. Sometimes you can exclude someone with the wrong word. 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.

Below are suggestions for words related to disability and Birdability; this is meant as a starting point, and by no means should be considered hard-and-fast rules. **Language is always evolving**, such a diverse group of people will have different preferences, and individuals have the right to choose how they wish to be identified. Follow the lead of the person you're referring to, and **never tell a disabled person how they should identify**. Their preference overrides whatever is on this list.

Generally, person-first, **enabling language is preferred**. State that someone is a "wheelchair user" (i.e., a person who uses a wheelchair to get around), rather than saying they are "wheelchair bound" (which implies that without a wheelchair they can do nothing... which is almost never accurate). However, some folks, particularly autistic people and Deaf people, prefer identity-first language (like "Deaf person" vs "person who is Deaf").

Don't use words that 'feel more polite' but are actually avoiding the reality of the situation (and are often seen as patronizing), such as 'differently abled', 'handi-capable' or 'special needs'. Most people are aware of their disability, so it's OK to say it out loud! After all, it's only taboo to mention something if it's shameful, and there is nothing shameful about having a disability.

Words to use

Able-bodied/temporarily able-bodied: Someone who does not have a disability.

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 other factors, however often it is the *environment* that is disabling – rather than the *person* – who is disabled.

Barriers: An obstacle that prevents someone from doing something they would like to. May be physical (e.g. a log obstructing a trail) or a cultural barrier (or taboo) which says (falsely!) that people with disabilities should not go outside or be birders.



Photo: Rhianyon Larson.

Birding vs bird watching: We prefer 'birding', as it does not imply only using one's eyes, but includes all birders who bird by ear, including those who are blind or have low vision.

Bird walk vs bird outing: We prefer 'bird outing' or 'field trip', 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, birding. May be temporary (e.g. during recovery from surgery), intermittent (e.g. fatigue as a result of a flare-up of multiple sclerosis), or permanent (e.g. spinal cord injury).

Invisible disability: Not all disabilities or health conditions have outward signs of their presence. You can't always identify birders who have chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia or lupus, for example, but many of these birders may experience accessibility challenges.

Mobility challenges: Includes anyone who has difficulty walking or otherwise moving around, such as wheelchair users or people who use other mobility devices; people with injuries or grumpy joints; (sometimes) people who use lower limb prosthetics; and people with movement or balance disorders.

Sighted: Describes someone who is not blind or who does not have low vision.

Words to avoid

Differently-abled: Avoid. Feels 'cutesy' (patronizing) and vague.

Electric wheelchair: Use "power wheelchair" instead; historically "electric wheelchair" was sometimes used to draw inappropriate parallels with electric chairs used for electrocution.

Handicapped: These days used only to describe an inanimate object, such as a parking space, but not a person, however some people feel comfortable using it about themselves.

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.

Normal: Avoid if you're talking about someone without a disability. (What is "normal", anyway?) Instead, use able-bodied, sighted, hearing, neurotypical, or all of the above.

People with physical challenges: Includes people who have some difficulty moving in any way. This may include anything from difficulty walking, or difficulty using their left hand. Best to avoid, as it is unclear which groups of people you're referring to.

Unsighted: Avoid. Implies the person cannot cast vision/plan for the future.

Thank you for your work to ensure that birding and the outdoors truly is for everybody!