

“We make the joy of the outdoors accessible to all!”



3 science-backed benefits of bird-watching!

1 Bolsters memory! Watching birds in nature is what Stanford University scientists call “green therapy,” which can improve memory. How? Our brains are hard-wired to pay more attention when we’re focused on the beauty around us. Plus, psychotherapist Toni Coleman says bird-watching has also been shown to erase negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones.

2 Soothes stress! Studies reveal that watching animals in nature soothes the mind and lowers the stress hormone *cortisol*. In fact, researchers out of Great Britain found that just 5 minutes of bird-watching significantly decreases the risk of depression, anxiety and stress by connecting you to the present moment and prompting the brain to release mood-boosting *serotonin*.

3 Boosts overall health! “Going for a ‘wildlife walk’ can dramatically improve your well-being,” explains psychologist Linda Wasmer Andrews, M.A. Bird sounds in particular help release *dopamine*, a chemical in the body that lowers blood pressure and heart rate. Can’t get outdoors? Download the free app Naturespace. Studies show simply listening to bird sounds has the same calming effect.

“We’ll create an interactive map,” they suggested. “People from each state can go online and take a survey to measure their park’s accessibility. Once they submit a site, it’ll be on the map for everyone!”

As the map began to gain traction, more and more people from across the country began to contribute their findings, and today, the Birdability Map has more than 700 accessible sites mapped across the United States and internationally. The map doesn’t just consider the

needs of the access challenged, it has also expanded to include those who are blind, deaf and in need of a gentler birding experience.

Birdability itself has expanded too—today, it includes almost 40 Birdability “captains” who hold meetings in their respective states

to continue the mission to make birding accessible to everyone. To Virginia, that community is the most important thing.

“It’s such a positive way for people to explore and get to know themselves, one another and to better the world,” the now-62-year-old says with a smile. “I’m just a person in a wheelchair who birds and loves it, and I asked myself, ‘How can I use that passion to make the world better?’ If each of us uses what we love to answer that question, the sky’s the limit!” —*Alexandra Pollock*

she then turned into a nonprofit called Birdability (Birdability.org), took flight. Virginia soon found herself presenting to support groups for amputees and stroke survivors and a rehabilitation group specializing in alternative therapy.

Picking up a few participants at each event, Virginia had enough people to start monthly Birdability outings to accessible trails, and soon her work caught the attention of The National Audubon Society, which asked her to present her findings during a 2019 convention.

As she explained to the audience, there was a list of criteria—from parking accessibility, slopes and surfaces of the trails—that made a park truly accessible.

“I can’t go cross-country to find each park,” Virginia explained. “But if people in each state could use my list to see if their parks fit, we’d be able to locate accessible parks and make them available to disabled people across the country!”

Just think of the network and community, Virginia thought as the audience buzzed. But how can we make it happen?

Helping others soar

At the end of her presentation, Virginia met map designers who had an answer.

“If each of us uses what we love to make the world a better place, the sky’s the limit!”

When Virginia Rose discovered that she could partake in the peaceful hobby of watching birds from her wheelchair, she set out to share it with others like her—and ended up giving thousands across the world wings!

Virginia Rose inhaled, the scent of the forest filling her senses as she trained her binoculars to the sky. Through the sun-dappled leaves, she scanned the branches, catching sight of a bird warbling from on high. She closed her eyes, listening to its song until she could identify it. “Scissor-tailed flycatcher!” she declared, writing its name down in her notebook.

For months, the English teacher had been birding, or watching birds, an activity her sister had suggested she try. But for the then-42-year-old from Austin, Texas, it was no ordinary feat getting out into the woods.

From the time she’d broken her back in a horse-riding accident at age 14, Virginia had been in a wheelchair. Still, her local Travis Audubon Society birding group had welcomed her into their fold with open arms, taking her on trips to parks across Austin and other states. The excursions had challenged her physically and intellectually, yet she’d never felt happier or more empowered.

I’ve found my best self while birding, she thought as she gazed around the clearing, her heart full. But as she closed her eyes again, she heard a song she had never heard before—only this time, it was playing in her heart. I have to make sure that other people with access challenges know they can have a shot at this joy too!

Sharing bliss

Inspired, Virginia began leading bird “outings,” and taking classes, eventually becoming a master birder. As she grew more confident in her birding abilities, she began rating local trails for Travis Audubon, identifying more than 30 accessible parks for people like her.

But how do I find people with disabilities to tell them that these parks exist? Virginia mused, when suddenly, it hit her. There was a group in town called the Spinal Cord Injured. Virginia contacted them and got permission to present her plan to help people with access challenges enjoy birding. And her initiative, which

“It’s all about letting people know that no matter who they are, they can do anything!” says Virginia, founder of Birdability



Birdability sets out to identify the most accessible parks for people who are blind, deaf or access challenged



Mike Fernandez/Audubon; Melanie Furr; Wayne Jeansonne; Getty (2)



Virginia has been in a wheelchair since a horse-riding accident when she was 14, but she found a new way to enjoy nature with birding



Virginia (center) and her team host outings too

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