

Sharing Mindful Birding in Your Community

**A compilation of resources to
start you on your journey**

“Mindful Birding combines observing birds with mindfulness techniques,
creating a practice that incorporates a heightened awareness.

Labeling or identifying birds is not the primary focus, but instead, the intention is
slowing down and noticing, using birds as our guides.”

- The Mindful Birding Network

**by Barb Patterson
February 2025**

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the intentional practice of being aware of the present moment without judgment of the experience and with an openness to curiosity.

Why Birds?

Wild birds may allow us to transport ourselves into the right here, right now, focusing on what is right in front of and all around us. Birds naturally share habitats with humans and are one of the most accessible and equitable forms of wildlife in our shared natural world. Their charismatic lives, colors, and dynamic migratory patterns can spark curiosity, wonder, and awe for those whose attention becomes captured by them.

Mindful Birding

When we combine the observation of wild birds with mindfulness practice, we harness the wellness benefits, creating a style of birding that can boost physical and mental well-being. This is Mindful Birding.

In other forms of mindfulness or meditation practice, there is an intention to use something as an anchor, such as the breath, whereas, with Mindful Birding, the birds themselves—their movements, behaviors, and sounds—can serve as an anchor for our attention.

While practicing Mindful Birding, we enhance our experiences with birds and nature, invite self-reflection, and learn more about our connections to our shared ecosystems. This awareness fosters stewardship and conservation.

What sets Mindful Birding apart from other styles of birding is the intention. With Mindful Birding, the intention shifts towards a wellness practice that encourages us to slow our pace and notice, using all our senses while allowing time for reflection.

The principles of Mindful Birding are based on the tenets of mindfulness and include the following:

- **Awareness** – of being in the moment with the birds
- **Intention** – to turn our attention to birds and nature for self-care
- **Nonjudgmental attitude** towards the experience with birds – allowing it to be what it will be, not labeling it good or bad
- **Curiosity** is enhanced and incorporated into the practice, inviting wonder and an openness to experience awe.

The Wellness Benefits of Mindful Birding

Being surrounded by birds and biodiversity can positively impact our physical and mental well-being. By practicing Mindful Birding, we embrace and celebrate the benefits wild birds offer us.

Measured scientific research demonstrates that being in biodiverse and green habitats, those which we often seek to observe birds can actively support our health and wellness by:

Lowering cortisol levels

Benefits of lowering cortisol: Studies show that after 20 minutes of exposure to green spaces outdoors, cortisol levels begin to drop, strengthening our immune health, reducing stress, promoting well-being, improving sleep, and stabilizing metabolism.

Promoting immune health—Plants, especially trees, emit antimicrobial aerosol chemicals called phytoncides, which can boost immunity and have a calming effect. Phytoncides act by stimulating an increase in disease-fighting white blood cells called natural killer cells (NK cells).

Providing Cardiac Support

Measured reductions of diastolic blood pressure and heart rate during and after time spent in green spaces.

Mental Wellness Support

Studies also show that exposure to wild birds, particularly birdsong, can benefit our mental wellness by actively:

- Boosting feelings of overall wellbeing
- Providing feelings of calm
- Reducing anxiety
- Disrupting irrational thinking
- Elevating mood
- Providing attention restoration

For more information and to access scientific studies that demonstrate these benefits, please go to: <https://www.themindfulbirdingnetwork.com/scientific-studies>

Hosting a Mindful Birding Outing

Introduction

Guides need a strong personal practice from which to draw, as offering a mindful experience is unique for each person. This is not meant to be a script but ideas of possibilities when hosting an outing.

- Introduce yourself.
- Ask them to introduce themselves.
- Hand out binoculars or field guides if you have them.
- Talk about water, snacks, and the location of restrooms.
- Explain the time and length of the walk you have planned.
- Describe the terrain, especially if it may present accessibility challenges
- Ask the group to stay together and whisper to avoid disturbing the birds.
- Ask them questions and allow them to ask questions throughout the walk.
- You may want a birder in the front and a group assistant in the back.
- It is not about identifying or competing to find the most birds.
- It is a slow walk designed to take in the scenery and enjoy the beauty of nature.
- When you see something (it does not have to be a bird), gather the participants and share with everyone.
- The slower you go, the more you will see.
- Check-in throughout the program and adjust the time for participants.
- Listen and learn from the experience.
- Every experience will be different.

Mindful Birding Outing

- Welcome people (names, pronouns, land acknowledgment, agreements, etc.), ask them what drew them to the event, or ask them if there's anything they'd like to share with the group to start.
- Define mindfulness. Keep the definition simple—bringing attention to the present moment with kindness and without judgment—so it can also be summarized as wise or compassionate attention.
- Why would one practice it (science, health benefits, sense of connection; for some people, it can be spiritual)?

- And what might that look like? (less focused on outcomes, not necessarily calling out IDs, maybe a different experience for different people, tuning in to pay attention, Letting everyone in the group be free and have space to make their discoveries and notice what they notice)
- Start with mindful movement and inviting people to open to their senses.
 - Invite people to close their eyes or soften their gaze and notice sounds – for 1-2 minutes. Invite people to be open to emotions and thoughts that may arise.
 - For example, you might invite the idea that sensations, emotions, and thoughts can move like a raft on a river or clouds. We can watch them pass but don't need to jump on, get stuck, or follow them. And that mindful birding asks that we turn the attention back to....BIRDS. ;-)
 - Take a moment for personal reflection, sharing with a partner, or sharing in the group if it is small.

Mindful Birding Practices

Sharing stories

This is a nice way to start a walk or a sit spot and let them get to know each other a little. Ask them to think of a fond memory of being outside in nature. Have them get comfortable, then close their eyes and think of a special place. Tell them they will have about three minutes to relax and be with that memory. Take deep breaths and think about engaging all their senses. After the time is up, ask them to open their eyes and relax. What does their body feel like after that experience? Ask them if they would like to share details about their moment in nature. How does it make them feel just thinking about and imagining that place?

If you can't get outside, visualizing nature and seeing pictures can still be healing.

Sit Spot

You can practice a daily sit spot at your kitchen window, in a backyard, or in a natural place where you live or work. It is one location you visit regularly, every day if you can, and that you get to know well. You can also do it during a bird outing with a group.

On a bird walk, ask participants to find a spot to sit, get comfortable and relax. Tell them they have a certain amount of time; the longer, the better (at least ten minutes), and you will call them back when the time is up. When they get to a place, get comfortable, relax, and take some cleansing breaths. What do you notice? Now, tune into movements around you.

Pay attention to all your senses. What do you hear? What smells do you notice? What type of plants are you with? As you become still and relaxed, you become part of the story. Did you scare off a bird flush when you got there? Wait a few minutes and see if the bird returns and settles back into its routine. Watch a single bird and notice its behavior and song; think about what they are doing and why. Is there more than one bird, and are they talking to each other? This is called bird language.

Birds communicate just like we do, and they can tell you what is happening at your sit spot. For example, if a cat walks by, the bird changes its behavior and sends an alarm.

After a designated time, ask them to come back to the group. Circle up and talk about the experience. What did you see? How do you feel? Responses can be simple or in-depth. Realizing this first practice was short, imagine what it would be like if you were there for an hour.

It starts with a sit spot. Go to the same place every day or whenever you can and stay as long as possible. Having a sit spot is very healing, gives you a sense of place, and helps you become more connected with the beauty of nature.

Wander

If you would prefer not to do a sit spot, a “wander” is a pleasant activity.

As you start your bird walk and reach a quiet place, ask the group to stand still and look around. What do they notice? Look at the layers in the landscape, listen to the sounds, and become aware of the smells. Have them share what they see in the group. If time allows, invite each participant to find an inviting place and wander there. Walk slowly, stand still, and become part of the landscape. As you observe your surroundings, think about what you are experiencing. A part of these experiences is becoming curious and asking questions about what you observe. What do you observe? What do you wonder? Call them back to the group and ask them to share their experience and “curiosities.”

The practice of mindful birding is very personal and different for everyone. Offer the workshop with flexibility and a lot of choices. Have check-ins with participants to discuss their feelings and what they want to do. You can't meet each person's needs but letting them know you care about their experience makes a difference.

Example

Mindful Birding Experience

Agenda – Saturday, September 13, 2024

9:00 am – 11:00 am

- I. Welcome to Barr Lake
 - a. Create a sense of place by describing the landscape

- II. Introduction
 - b. Introduction to the project
 - c. Names and favorite bird
 - d. Mindfulness practice - Sharing stories
 - e. Our connection to nature

- III. Mindful Birding
 - a. What is mindfulness
 - b. What is mindful birding
 - c. Why birds
 - d. Health Benefits of Nature

- IV. Mindful birding practices
 - a. Sit spot
 - b. Journaling
 - c. Bird Language
 - d. Reflection

- V. Closing
 - a. Mindful birding as an ongoing practice
 - b. Quote
 - c. Thank you!

Offering Inclusive and Accessible Programs

Through education, outreach, and advocacy, bird ability ensures that the birding community and the outdoors are welcoming, inclusive, safe, and accessible for everybody. We focus on people with mobility challenges, blindness and low vision, chronic illness, intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental illness, and those who are neurodivergent, deaf, or hard of hearing or who have other health concerns. In addition to current birders, we strive to introduce birding to people with disabilities and other health concerns who are not yet birders so they, too, can experience it.

Steps to implement accessible and inclusive birding

1. Ask the experts and collaborate
2. Read up about access considerations for birding location
3. Scope out accessible birding locations to hold your outing.
4. Complete a bird ability site review and submit it to the bird ability map
5. Hold monthly accessible bird outings

Writing a bird outing event description

1. Day, time, and meeting point
2. State that the outing is accessible and inclusive
3. Is this outing specifically open to beginner birders or families with small children
4. Provide detailed information about the physical accessibility of the birding location
5. Provide information about outing leaders
6. State the availability of loaner binoculars or other adaptive birding equipment
7. Provide a phone number or email address of the outing's leader/s
8. Two examples to think about:
 - a. Roniq Bartanen, [Birds Connect Seattle](#):
No birding experience is necessary. The option is available to leave when you like. These monthly outings include all ages, gender pronouns, sexual orientation, races, cultures, abilities, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status. The trail is mostly flat, paved, and ADA-compliant. There are public transportation stops for buses #45 and #62, and bike racks are nearby. Small parking lots fill fast, so it's suggested that you arrive early. Binoculars can be borrowed via BCS Nature shop in Wedgewood for Birds Connect Seattle events. Please leave pets at home so as not to scare off our feather friends. Click the link below for meeting information, including time, what to expect, and location. I hope to see you there!
 - b. Or you can say: Everyone is welcome. No experience is necessary.

Accessible Bird Outings

Planning

- Before your bird outing, visit the site and evaluate the location for accessibility.
- For more information, check out the [Birdability Map](#) and other resources online at www.birdability.org.

Beginning

- Smile at people.
- Wear a name tag that is easy to read.
- Include a welcome statement with a brief land acknowledgment.
- Ask if they have water and a snack or other personal needs
- Invite everyone to share names and pronouns if they like.
- You can also ask if they would like to share anything else they would like other participants to know (for example, if they don't want to be crowded).
- Instead of asking how experienced they are, ask them about their favorite bird or the last bird they saw.

During the outing

- Incorporate five-minute breaks and check-ins.
- Believe someone when they see a bird or notice something
- Don't assume someone needs help. Ask them what you can do.
- Be aware of participants who might need to come to the front or sit down to rest.
- Set up the scope at wheelchair height.
- Don't touch someone's mobility device.
- Stay aware of the time so you can return to the start on time.

After the outing

- Ask them if they have any final thoughts to share
- Any questions?
- Pay attention to any needs they may have after the workshop" esp. food and water.
- Thank them for coming AND sharing
- Mention other programs coming up

Language Use and Communication Tips

Language and the words we use are powerful. Sometimes, you can exclude someone with the wrong word. Language constantly evolves, and individuals can choose how they wish to be identified. Follow the lead of the person you're referring to, and it's okay to ask.

These are suggestions for words related to disability and inclusive birding, but language constantly evolves. If you are uncomfortable about which word to use, you can ask. Person-first enabling language is preferred. For example, using the phrase "a person who is blind" instead of "a blind person" emphasizes prioritizing the person before the identity and helps eliminate stereotypes that can form. Another example is using the saying "wheel-chair users" instead of "wheelchair bound," which implies that without a wheelchair, they can do nothing.

Words to Use

- *Accessibility challenges*: the difficulties someone experiences in interacting. Sometimes, the environment is disabling – rather than the person – who is disabled.
- *Barriers*: an obstacle preventing someone from doing something they want to.
- *Birding* vs. bird watching birding is preferred because it does not imply only using one's eyes for those who have low vision.
- *Bird outing* vs bird walk includes all types of birding, whether in a blind or in a car, which does not include the act of walking.
- *Disability*: any physical, cognitive, or mental diagnosis, condition, illness, or injury that affects someone's ability
- *Invisible disabilities*: not all health conditions have outward signs of their presence.

Words to Avoid

- *Handicapped*: these days, this refers to inanimate objects, such as parking spaces.
- *Impaired*: this word is no longer in use. Use low vision instead of vision impaired.
- *Normal*: there is no such thing as normal
- People with physical challenges include those who have difficulty moving in any way.

Thank you for your work in ensuring that birding and the outdoors are for everybody!
And remember, we define a birder as anyone who enjoys birds!

Excerpts from birdability.org; see also accessbirding.com

Inclusivity in the Outdoors

Sexual orientation and gender identity are fundamental aspects of human diversity. Inclusive education that recognizes and respects the LGBTQIA+ community is not just a matter of social justice — it's essential for fostering mental health, combating discrimination, promoting workplace inclusion, and building stronger communities.

Historically, outdoor field experiences have not been welcoming to marginalized communities, including LGBTQIA+ individuals. Mo Lunden and Sara Bombaci (2023) highlight the need for cultural and procedural changes in their article "[Making Outdoor Field Experiences More Inclusive for the LGBTQIA+ Community](#)." Despite recent calls to address the lack of diversity in outdoor programs, many changes are still needed.

They propose the following actions to promote LGBTQIA+ inclusion:

1. Using gender-inclusive language
2. Providing gender-neutral gear
3. Ensuring LGBTQIA+-sensitive medical and emergency equipment
4. Implementing inclusive travel and accommodation policies
5. Adapting fieldwork and outdoor activities
6. Establishing friendly community guidelines

The [State of Inclusivity in the Outdoors](#) report by outdoor leader Merrell (2020) reveals that 1 in 5 respondents have experienced discrimination in outdoor spaces.

The report identifies several key issues:

1. Conflicting emotions exist when outside across the globe
2. Indigenous communities face barriers to being in their natural homes
3. Communities of color still feel cautious about the safety of outdoor spaces
4. Women have growing concerns regarding safety and continue to be underrepresented
5. Income impacts outdoor participation
6. LGBTQIA+ people were left out despite a desire to participate

The article outlines strategies to support more significant support and participation by LGBTQIA+ communities, highlighting key terminology to increase awareness.

Actions you can take are:

1. Expand representation in marketing
2. Commit to getting youth outside as early as possible to instill a lifelong love of the outdoors and increase a sense of ownership and belonging
3. Ensure all staff have bias training and are equipped to create welcoming experiences for all
4. Find green spaces in urban areas to improve recreational regions closer to home

5. Address both physical and perceived access issues for underserved communities by establishing partnerships, providing transportation, reducing, or subsidizing admission, and eliminating admission fees
6. Redefine and reimagine the outdoors. The outdoors is for everyone and everywhere. Outdoor experiences are as diverse as the communities that enjoy them. When we expand our perception of the outdoors, we help make it more inclusive for those with different experiences. The outdoors is ubiquitous, and it's up to us to help all feel welcome.

The Right to Belong

The LGBTQIA+ community deserves full participation in outdoor experiences—as students, researchers, educators, recreators, and professionals. This inclusion enriches the outdoor community and contributes to a more diverse and vibrant society.

Resources for Inclusion

Numerous resources and organizations are working towards greater inclusivity in outdoor spaces, particularly in the birding community. Some notable groups include:

- Anti-racist Collective of Avid Birders
- BIPOC Birding Club of Wisconsin
- Feminist Bird Club
- Philly Queer Birders
- Urban Collective

The American Psychological Association's [Inclusive Language Guide](#) is an excellent starting point for guidance on inclusive language.

Conclusion

Regina Hill (2023) states, "The inclusivity in the outdoors report shows that there are still barriers to overcome. It is essential to address the obstacles that those who identify as women, Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ people, and those with lower incomes encounter to ensure that everyone feels welcome outside."

By recognizing these challenges and actively working to create more inclusive outdoor spaces, we can ensure that the beauty and benefits of nature are accessible to all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or socioeconomic status. This work is not just important—it's essential for building a more equitable and harmonious society.

Resources

Books on Mindful Birding

- *Ornithotherapy*, by Holly Merker, Richard Crossley, and Sophie Crossley
- *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness*, by Dr. Qing Li
- *The Art of Mindful Bird Watching*, by Claire Thompson
- *Zen Birding*, by David White and Susan Guyette
- *Bird Therapy*, by Joe Harkness
- *What the Robin Knows*, by Jon Young
- *What It's Like to Be a Bird*, by David Allen Sibley
- *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*, by David Allen Sibley

Internet Resources

- Mindful Birding Network: <https://www.themindfulbirdingnetwork.com/>
- Mindful Birding Podcast: <https://feeds.buzzsprout.com/2148646.rss>
- Ornithotherapy Book: <https://ornithotherapy.com/ornithotherapybook>
- *Mindful Birding: A Journey*, by Barbara Patterson: <https://bit.ly/MindfulBirding>
- *Keep Looking Up: Your guide to the powerful healing of birdwatching* by Tammah Watts, available at Bookshop <https://bit.ly/BookshopWatts>
- Certified Access Birding Outdoor Leader training: <https://accessbirding.com/certified-access-birding-outing-leader-course>

This project was funded by a National Audubon Society 'Audubon in Action' Grant and made possible by support from Audubon Rockies, Fort Collins Audubon Society, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Holly Merker, and Holly Thomas.

A special thank you to Deanna Krause, founder of the UC Health Mindful Birding Cancer Project in Fort Collins, and all the organizations that donated resources to help us share Mindful Birding.