

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

The Mindful Birding Project

by Barbara Patterson, Holly Merker, and Holly Thomas

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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.

In contrast to other styles of birding, Mindful Birding incorporates mindfulness practices. The experience encourages us to slow our pace. Participants use breath and their senses (sights, sounds, smells) to enhance their outdoor experience. Individuals focus their attention on birds, their behavior, and their present surroundings. Mindful birding also isn't outcome-oriented - there isn't usually a "planned route" or "final destination." Active bird counting is not a priority. While bird identification can take place, it is not the focus. Instead, participants use birds to anchor their attention and focus on the present moment.

The principles of Mindful Birding are based on the healing 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 are observed 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 rather to serve as a set of possibilities when hosting an outing, which can occur anywhere there are birds. The length of these experiences vary widely and can depend on the event, host, and participants. Individuals have noted benefits when doing this regularly during 15-20 minute increments, while groups may choose to dedicate several hours or more.

Mindful Birding Outing ideas for getting started:

- Welcome people. Offer names, pronouns, land acknowledgment, agreements, etc. Introduce yourself and ask participants to introduce themselves.
- 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.
- Review logistics – location of restrooms, breaks, water, benches, and remind participants of the tentative plan for how the outing might go – length and timing.
- Consider sharing, early on, the ground rules for the outing. This can help prepare everyone for a positive experience.
- 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
- What might that look like? Mindful birding may be
 - Less focused on outcomes or targets
 - Less focused on identification or calling out IDs
 - A different experience for different people
 - An invitation to tuning in to pay attention. Consider inviting everyone in the group to make their discoveries and notice what they notice
- It can sometimes be helpful to include mindful movement and invite people to open to their senses. People can often get achy from birding.
 - Examples: 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.
 - Invite some simple stretches.

- 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. Mindful birding asks that we turn the attention back to...BIRDS. ;-)
- Check in with your group from time to time to see how they are doing, and make adjustments to accommodate the group's needs.
- If there is time and it seems appropriate, take a moment for personal reflection, sharing with a partner, or sharing in the group if it is small.
- Thank people for coming!
- Listen and learn from the experience!

Mindful Birding Practices: more ideas to get started

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 can be 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.”

Mindful Birding and other practices

Consider combining mindful birding with another practice like forest bathing, journaling, mindful movement, sketching, poetry, or something else. Make the practice your own and offer something you love!

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 always 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 – 4:00 pm

- 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

In describing your outings, it's important to use inclusive language. A great place to start is The American Psychological Association's [Inclusive Language Guide](#).

There are many excellent resources available to assist in the creation of an inclusive and accessible mindful birding outing.

Some of our favorites are:

- Birdability www.birdability.org
- Access Birding www.accessbirding.com

These websites offer a breadth and depth of expertise that you can draw from to create birding outings that will appeal to many folks.

In selecting a site for your outing, things to consider might be choosing a quieter location, with fewer distractions or interruptions from passersby (on bicycles, joggers, off leash dogs, etc.). Other considerations might be considering the terrain, any steps or slopes, benches for resting, comfort features (like flushing toilets), parking or entrance fees, trail maintenance, among other features that would be unique in your area and climate.

It's important when describing your outing to include as many details regarding your site as will be necessary for participants to determine whether this outing will be right for them.

Birdability states: "Our vision is that birding truly is for everybody and every body, regardless of disability or other health concerns."

Their website includes topics like:

- Access Considerations
- Writing Bird Outing Event Descriptions
- Inclusive Language Use
- Adaptive Birding Equipment
- Understanding Neurodiversity
- Tip Sheet for Leading Accessible and Inclusive Bird Outings
- And many more....

Access Birding shares the message of inclusivity and access with their aim to:

"Create and maintain, safe and inclusive spaces for disabled, queer and BIPOC folks, and would-be allies of these communities."

In addition to resources to get you started, Access Birding offers consulting and training for those interested in workshops, webinars or certification as a *Certified Access Birding Outing Leader*.

Other Resources for Inclusion:

Some notable groups working towards greater inclusivity in outdoor spaces, particularly in the birding community include:

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

Look for affinity groups like these in your area.

Partner and collaborate

- Where are the needs in your community that aren't being met?
- Where can you increase outreach?
- If you don't know how to do it, maybe someone else does – join up!
- Find other allies or interested parties
- Collaborate to reach more people in the community

Conclusion

Thanks for letting us share these resources highlighting the health benefits and joy of mindful birding.

We wish you many joyful encounters shared with birds and others in your community as you broaden the circle of inclusivity.

Resources

A Few Books on Mindful Birding

- *Ornithotherapy: For Your Mind, Body, and Soul*, by Holly Merker, Richard Crossley, and Sophie Crossley
- *Keep Looking Up: Your Guide to the Powerful Healing of Birdwatching* by Tammah Watts
- *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
- *Dare to Bird: Exploring the Joy and Healing Power of Birds*, by Melissa Hafting

Internet Resources

- Mindful Birding Network: <https://www.themindfulbirdingnetwork.com/>
- Mindful Birding Podcast: <https://feeds.buzzsprout.com/2148646.rss>
- *Mindful Birding: A Journey*, by Barbara Patterson: <https://bit.ly/MindfulBirding>
- Certified Access Birding Outdoor Leader training: <https://accessbirding.com/certified-access-birding-outing-leader-course>
- Birdability: www.birdability.org

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