

# Study considers ways to increase accessibility for all wildlife enthusiasts

March 26 2024

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

One in three birders experiences accessibility challenges to participation in birding, according to Virginia Tech researchers Emily Sinkular and Ashley Dayer.

"I like to think of our research as blending together two previously

unconnected fields: disability studies and wildlife recreation," said Sinkular, a Ph.D. student and lead author of the study published March 26 in the journal *Human Dimensions and Wildlife*. "There's been quite a lot of research on disability and lots of research on birding, but very few researchers have combined these two topics together."

The researchers used a nationwide survey of U.S. wildlife viewers to compare the challenges and needs of birders with and without disabilities. Along with co-authors Freya McGregor, research associate in the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, and Morgan Karns, they analyzed open-ended responses using models of disabilities, or different frames of reference, to understand better how to talk about and think about disability so it resonates with [disabled people](#).

Dayer's Human Dimensions Lab has partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Multistate Conservation Grant Program to increase research on wildlife viewers with disabilities and to support state fish and wildlife agencies in learning how to support these populations better. Her lab specializes in enhancing conservation success through applying [social science](#) to engage people effectively and works to ensure that all voices are represented in research and conservation.

Dayer, an affiliated faculty member of Fralin Life Sciences Institute's Global Change Center, said she hopes the work broadcasts a message of both inclusion and hope.

"My message for neurodiverse or disabled people: you are not alone in experiencing a desire to access nature and also facing additional challenges to doing so," Dayer said. "And your challenges are increasingly being seen and addressed."

"We suggest agencies and organizations reflect on how to make their programs more accessible and train staff or volunteers to do so as well,"

said Dayer, associate professor in the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation. "Acknowledging that the responsibility to support the participation of disabled birders rests on society and institutions, not on disabled people themselves, is essential."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four Americans has a disability, and that number is expected to rise with an aging population. Evidence further shows that people with disabilities are also historically underserved in wildlife-related recreation, including birding.

While the researchers found that birders with disabilities experienced more constraints than their peers, including lack of accessible features, safety concerns, and crowds at birding sites, commonalities in their needs for support of their recreational activity were also shown.

Birders with and without disabilities expressed interest in access to more high-quality birding locations and information about where and when to view wildlife. This suggests strategies to improve wildlife viewing opportunities can benefit both groups.

"This shows us that agencies or organizations making changes to better include birders with disabilities can actually benefit everyone," said Sinkular, who is also a student in the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation.

Ultimately, studying and planning for including people with disabilities in recreation will support broader social inclusion for this large population. The benefits of birding are multifaceted, including mental well-being, social connections, and, ultimately, conservation actions. This research helps to bring these benefits to people with disabilities.

**More information:** *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* (2024)

Provided by Virginia Tech

Citation: Study considers ways to increase accessibility for all wildlife enthusiasts (2024, March 26) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-ways-accessibility-wildlife-enthusiasts.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.