



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sound Safari

Connecting Blind Children To Nature

Blind Birders' Tip Sheet

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Here is a how-to list on one program called Sound Safara to connect blind people to nature. It's not perfect. We are still learning how to improve our programs. Some of these recommendations we learned the hard way and a few we learned by talking to others with similar experience.



Kent Fothergill (wearing shorts), leads a birding for the blind fieldtrip. Credit: Steve Bouffard/USFWS

The whole idea of the Sound Safari program is sharing enthusiasm and appreciation for nature. Your main job is sharing your enthusiasm for nature; teaching how to recognize individual bird calls is secondary. Emphasize that if you enjoy this activity, you don't need us to lead it. You can do this on your own with the help of a relative or loved one. Don't worry about being perfect. You don't need to know every call and song. Participants will be overwhelmed that anyone even considered sharing an outdoor experience with them.

☒ Partner with a non-government agency (NGO) or any agency used to working with people with disabilities. They can help locate participants and can help with special needs and transportation. Some of our partners have operated a lending library of bird tapes and recorders and have produced Braille bird lists.

☒ Start each trip with a welcome, introduce yourself and orient participants to the location. Then provide an overview about why birds call, what calls they make and what they are likely to hear that day. If the participants arrive on one bus, some of this introduction can be done while driving to the site. Have each individual who will help with the tour introduce and say a little about themselves. This is essential as voice recognition will be the only way participants will be able to recognize the tour guides and assistants.

☒ Bring wings, feathers, feet, beaks, full body models for people to feel. Bird song is beautiful but it doesn't tell you much about the size of the bird, how it flies or how it specializes in life. Live animals are great too. Domestic ducks (or maybe domestic pigeons) are robust enough to be handled without harm and small enough not to harm the handler. Have antiseptic wipes or hand cleaner for cleaning up after handling specimens.

☒ Select a location with smooth walking trails, lawn, paved and gravel paths also work fine. Avoid paths with uneven ground and sites with lots of noise or where you will have to share with bikes, in-line skaters, etc. Check the paths before participants arrive to pick up limbs, stones etc.

☒ Walk slowly. The leader generally should walk backwards so he/she can watch all the participants and communicate better with them. Have some assistants bring up the rear of the group.

☒ For pure enjoyment of the calls the dawn chorus is great, but to identify individual species later in the morning is better. There are too many birds calling in the dawn chorus to try to point out individual species. It is usually difficult to get participants on scene at daylight anyway.

☒ Participants' abilities vary greatly and some may or may not have endurance for longer hikes. You do not need to go long distances – ¼ to ½ mile is usually enough. Have benches or picnic tables scattered along the path for rest stops if needed. Many visually impaired persons also have other problems such as diabetes. Be prepared to handle diabetic shock cases and similar problems. Make sure there are suitable restrooms available.

☒ Some blind persons have a poor concept of distance. Tell participants how long it will take to walk the path, not how far it is in miles.

☒ Point out birds with phrase such as "the bird singing over your heads to your right" rather than with gestures or with phrases like "on the third branch on the left side of the

maple tree". Bring CDs or tapes so you say "here's what a Yellow Warbler sounds like". It helps pinpoint which species they are listening to when several species are calling simultaneously. Also, it can be used judiciously to call birds in.

If you allow sighted participants to tag along who want to learn bird songs, explain to them that this trip is primarily for visually impaired persons. They are welcome to attend, but there is no stopping to identify any birds that are not singing.

Don't stop at just bird calls. Help them experience the sound of other creatures, cicadas, frogs, etc. Let them use other senses, taste wild cherries, smell the sagebrush, feel the bark textures of different trees, feel the wind and sun on their faces.

Contact news media. This program is guaranteed to get positive news coverage for you and your organization. Use it to raise awareness of access issues for the disabled, nature conservation and connecting everyone to nature.

Make sure all your help knows how to behave around seeing eye dogs, if any are present on the tour

Additional Birding Tips with the Blind

- When observing birds orient the group of blind people in single file and face the same direction.
- Use the hours of the clock to identify the position of a bird's call, and avoid confusion. (Example: Did you hear that at 3 o'clock?)
- Describe the bird's colors with references for the colors: "blue as the sky," "green as the grass", "yellow as the sun." This is particularly helpful for people who have not been blind from birth and have no other frame of reference.
- Describe other characteristics of the bird, "small as a mouse" or "as big as a chicken."
- Detailed descriptions will help individuals to create an image in their head (especially those with previous vision; Example: "This is a light brownish color large bird with white thin stripes running down its back.")
- If you have further questions about working with a blind or visually impaired person don't hesitate to ask them. They know that's why you're there and want you to feel comfortable learning about playing outdoors with the blind.

BLIND BIRDERS CONTACT INFORMATION IN TEXAS

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