AUDIO STORY TRANSCRIPT:

Birders with disabilities are making the hobby more accessible

By Catson Shane, University of Vermont Community News Service

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HOST: As birds migrate south for the winter, Vermont's birders are flocking to identify them. In central Vermont, some birders are working to make the hobby more accessible for people with disabilities.

Catson Shane of the University of Vermont Community News Service recently joined a group on an accessible birding walk.

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[Footsteps on gravel; wooden bird whistle honking; laughter]

CATSON SHANE, REPORTER: I'm walking with about a dozen people along the Universal Access Trail at the North Branch Nature Center in Montpelier.

Our guide, Luis Gonzalez, is teaching the group about birds by imitating their calls.

LUIS GONZALEZ: "Can anybody tell me— oh, hear the sound." [Caws three times]

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE 1: "Sounds like a crow or a raven."

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE 2: "Is it a turkey vulture?"

SHANE: The trail here is wide and flat enough for wheelchairs, and we're joined by an American Sign Language interpreter.

Birder Nick Parker organized this event.

NICK PARKER: "Oh, there's a white-breasted nuthatch right there."

Parker volunteers with Birdability, a national nonprofit that works to make birding more inclusive. He says this is the first Birdability event ever hosted in Vermont.

PARKER: “It’s just so great to be out with people who are excited and interested in birding.”

Parker is hard of hearing. He went on his first group bird walk with an ASL interpreter about a year ago. The increase in language access helped him process the group’s chatter and ID more birds.

PARKER: “I didn’t realize how much I’d been missing. I mean, I had a feeling, and— but it was just, like, really fantastic, and it did feel like full access.”

Mary Essex was on the bird walk. She’s deaf, so she uses visual indicators to identify birds, like flight patterns, coloration, and feeding behaviors. A friend of hers, who is blind, got her into birding.

ESSEX: “We used to work together way back when. And we would go on bird walks together, and he sort of got me introduced. And he'd say, ‘I hear this,’ or ‘I hear that,’ and then I would, you know— he would hear the, do the auditory part, and then I would confirm it visually, and we would ID the birds that way.”

Jude Hawthorne started birding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hawthorne uses a wheelchair, and relies on accessible trails like this one to get out in the woods.

HAWTHORNE: “Well I think, like, disabled people are left out of so many spaces. And the outdoors is, like, right here, and we're still left out of it. But Vermont is doing a pretty good job of, like— accessible trails are cropping up, and I'm so grateful for all of them.”

The nice thing about birds, Parker says, is that you can find them anywhere — even the grocery store parking lot. He has ID’ed 211 species.

PARKER: “211 is my life list. But what is, kind of, my more important list right now is my Washington County list, because I really like to try to bird in my home county first.”

And if you don’t live in Washington County...

PARKER: “There's so many amazing spots in Vermont. Oh my gosh, there's, like, snow geese spectacle at Dead Creek and all this cool stuff. Nighthawk watches along the Connecticut River down in Westminster. Like from, you know, east to west, north to south of Vermont, there's just, like, so much that you can do.”

Parker wants to make sure everyone is involved in the fun.

PARKER: “People just being out and being in nature and enjoying being in nature is, is so cool and so fulfilling. I just want to bring that to everybody.”

Now he’s working with other birding groups around the state to host more accessible bird walks, and hopefully encourage others to do the same.

For the University of Vermont Community News Service, I’m Catson Shane.