

Wildlife Viewing & Nature Tourism WG- Notes

AFWA Annual Meeting 2024

Multi-State Conservation Grant Update and Recommendations for Removing Barriers to Wildlife-related Recreation for People with Disabilities Presentation – Ashley Dayer, PhD, and Freya McGregor, The Dayer Lab, Virginia Tech

- This year working on access and inclusion for Wildlife Viewing
- 39% of wildlife viewers have accessibility challenges → how can state agencies support them
- Used focus groups in all 4 regions of the U.S. to try and answer this question
 - Had 102 eligible participants; had an issue with bots filling out the survey
- 8 focus groups; 32 participants with 3-6 participants per group
- Demographics: 38% SE, NE 12%, W 25%, Midwest 25%; mostly women participated
- Most people were wildlife viewers only, not hunters, anglers; 66% self-identified as neurodivergent.
- Disabilities included: chronic illness, physical, mental health, hearing, cognition, vision, other
- Will be doing qualitative coding- review transcripts to identify **key themes** that emerge from discussions → will generate a report
- Examine Facilitators of wildlife viewing and effective allyship for disabled wildlife viewers
- Initial Findings:
 - We wanted to understand how wildlife viewing programs, including staff and wildlife viewing locations can be better facilitators of wildlife viewing.
 - Intrapersonal → interpersonal → structural
 - Common themes:
 - NEED → providing detailed information ahead of time: site description, start/stop time; facilities available (bathrooms, water, shade, parking/transportation)
 - WANT → having smaller group sizes for programs
 - SOCIAL → generally they feel like they don't belong (by addressing the above items that can make them get a better sense of belonging)
 - Desired Features:
 - Trail Design → trails with firm and stable surfaces; more boardwalks (and keeping them maintained); more benches and shade (well designed and placed); more signage with access information
 - Facilities → enough parking; more bathrooms; drivable wildlife viewing locations
 - Regular Maintenance
 - Need more funds to support accessibility → improve accessibility; maintaining existing features; paying disabled consultants
 - Need more staff training on inclusion and disability etiquette
 - More positive social media communities

- Allyship:
 - Organizational mindset- not assume
 - Go beyond accessibility standards
 - Partnerships
 - Consult early and often
 - Use up-to-date disability language
- **SUMMARY**
 - More **benches** (*structural*)
 - More **detailed information** provided about programs, trails, and other wildlife viewing locations (*structural, interpersonal*)
 - Genuine, ongoing **partnerships** with the disability community (*structural, interpersonal*)
 - [View Presentation](#).
- **NEXT STEPS**
 - VTech will do full analysis
 - Two-part results and recommendations workshop (zoom)
 - Publishing final report and webinar in 2024
 - Hoping to another MSCG→ if so, then will develop playbook for states

Neurodiversity and Birding Project – James Giocomo, PhD, American Bird Conservancy

- Neurodivergent = the range of differences in individual brain function and behavior traits, regarded as part of the normal variations in the human population.
 - Can cause social-emotional reciprocity, non-verbal communication behaviors, developing and maintaining relationships
- Lots of vocabulary- best to use language that the person prefers
 - High functioning vs low functioning are NOT helpful terms
- 75% of autistic adults are underemployed or unemployed

WHY BIRDING:

- Reduces anxiety
- Perfect for obsessions (common with autism and other neurodivergent diagnoses)
- Low barrier to entry
- Don't expect the following of 'normal' social expectations

ANT = Autism Nature Trail [<https://autismnaturetrail.com/>]

- A public-private partnership to provide a recreational trail within Letchworth State Park designed to allow visitors with varying abilities to push boundaries, explore new activities and develop skills
- ANT made an inclusive place public

American Bird Conservancy (ABC) Conservation and Justice Fellowship

- Paid part-time opportunities for individuals from a diversity of backgrounds to illuminate intersections between the needs of birds and people
- Trying to develop a trail that uses the ANT principles

- Offer challenges to individuals who may have never been on a nature trail, but provide choices to ‘opt out’ of the experience; us Project WILD activities and use the inclusion section on the AFWA Project WILD website

Work Plan Review

Current Charge: To advance wildlife viewing and nature tourism across North America by helping develop, support, and promote programs that welcome and engage new and **diverse** audiences, build on traditional constituencies, and increase support for wildlife conservation.

Updated Charge: To advance wildlife viewing and nature tourism across North America by helping develop, support, and promote programs that welcome and engage new and **broad** audiences, build on traditional constituencies, and increase support for wildlife conservation.

WVNT Updates from States/Organizations – Roundtable Discussion

- Come prepared to share any milestones, successes, innovative projects, or questions your organization wants to share or discuss with colleagues from other states/provinces/territories

6th Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Academy

- February 16-20, 2026 in Seattle, Washington
- www.wvntacademy.com
- Registration should open in August 2025
- Requestion for Proposals will be out by Mach 2025

Ongoing communication tools

- Webinars, Facebook Group, Monthly Calls
 - May have virtual workshops instead of just webinars
- Have monthly working group calls; virtual meetings the 3rd Wednesday of everyone month from 1-2:30pm Central; want to be added to the list email Shelly.plante@tpwd.texas.gov
- There is a FB page- private groups. Email Shelly to be added.
- WVNT webinars are also posted on the AFWA website and <https://bit.ly/3Ks38zs>
- Visit the WVNT WG page for resources: <https://www.fishwildlife.org/afwa-acts/afwa-committees/wildlife-viewing-nature-tourism-working-group>