



Access Considerations for Birding Locations

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) sets clear guidelines for the built environment to improve access for people with disabilities. The [Americans with Disabilities Act Standards](#) are enforceable by law and apply to newly constructed commercial, and state, and local government facilities. Additionally, the [Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Guidelines: Outdoor Developed Areas \(2013\)](#) apply to some components of trails on federal lands. Both these laws are incredibly important, but they do not cover everything. Just because a facility is ADA-compliant does not mean that everyone with a disability will be able to access it. According to the [Braunability Drive for Inclusion Report Card 2020](#), only 15% of people with mobility challenges are satisfied with the effectiveness of ADA laws. **The ADA Standards should be considered the minimum — a great start, but there's a lot more to it!**

The list below has been compiled by an occupational therapist after consultation with birders and nature lovers who have various disabilities and other health concerns and covers a broad range of users. However, there is always more to learn, and Birdability makes no claim that this is an exhaustive list of access considerations for every possible user.

[Download the Birdability Site Review Checklist](#)

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that no one can predict what an individual with an accessibility challenge can or cannot do... sometimes, not even the person themselves. Even if a location is not ADA-compliant, it may still be accessible for you. We encourage a sense of exploration for folks with access challenges; if a location appears to be reasonably accessible for your needs, please don't let

someone else's assessment of you prevent you from trying it out. As Virginia Rose, founder of Birdability and a manual wheelchair user says, **"You won't know until you go!"**

This list is set out following the order of the Birdability Site Review, in order to help explain why these features matter to various birders. To access the printable, screen reader-accessible [Birdability Site Review, click here](#).

1. General Access

Is there a fee to enter the state park, nature center or location? Are discounts available to certain people, or on certain dates?

Is there a fee to park?

Is the trail near or on a **public transit** route? Many people with disabilities, including those who are legally blind, cannot drive. Is there a way for them to get to the trail?

Distance

What is the **distance** of the trail? Some people need shorter trails, e.g. 0.5 – 2 miles (0.8 – 3km); others may want longer trails so they can keep on birding! Is the trail a loop, out-and-back, or 'lollipop'? A 'lollipop' trail goes out one way, then has a loop at the end. Trail users will then retrace their tracks on the initial portion of the trail.

Trail information and signage

Is trail accessibility information available ahead of time via the location's **website**? Many websites state they have an "accessible trail", but this is not enough detail for most potential visitors.

Do signs include **technical accessibility information** about the trail? An "accessible" trail may be accessible to one person, but not another. Providing

this level of detailed of information for trail users to make their own informed decisions is ideal!

Trail distance.

Surface type (see below for more).

Slope/gradient/running slope: how steep the trail is. (See below for more detail.) Maximum gradient and average gradient are both really helpful to know.

Cross slope: how much of an angle trail users will be on as they travel down the trail. This can be particularly important to wheelchair and scooter users, who do not want to tip over!

At the minimum, does the sign have an easily readable **map** with trail distances?

Are benches and rest areas marked on the map, with distances in between indicated? Folks who need to rest will be grateful to know ahead of time how far they must travel.

If colors are used to indicate different trails, are symbols used too? Folks with colorblindness may not be able to tell the difference between the 'green trail' and the 'red trail', but will have more success if, for example, the 'green trail' also has circles along the line, and the 'red trail' has triangles.

Is there accessible and accurate **signage** at the trailhead and at any trail intersections? Detailed signs at trail intersections allow visitors to make informed decisions about continuing or turning back.

Parking

Is it on a **slope**? Is the surface **paved**, or filled with **potholes**?

Are there **parking spaces reserved for people with disabilities**? How many?

Are there **van-accessible parking spaces**? These are not the 'regular' accessible parking spaces, but those with 8 feet (2.5m) of side space (often 'hashed out' with painted diagonal lines.) These spaces can be vital for wheelchair users who have a ramp to get in and out of the side of their van. If there isn't enough space to the side, they will not be able to get out!

If there are no van-accessible parking spaces on the morning of your bird outing, park across two spaces and use an orange cone with a wheelchair sticker on it to block the area next to your ramp space to 'save' it.

Are **curb cuts** present? Curb cuts are the built-in ramps from one paved surface to the sidewalk. They allow people with mobility challenges to move easily between the two areas.

2. Services available at this location

Is there a **visitor center**, where visitors might find someone who can help identify a mystery bird or seek help if needed?

Are there **staff or volunteers** on site? This may reassure someone that they won't be the only person at this location when they visit.

Are **interpretive programs** available? Many people, especially new birders, may be glad for the opportunity to learn more! Others may appreciate knowing ahead of time that there might be many other visitors at this site.

Are these interpretive programs accessible and inclusive?

Accessible trams or motorized tours may allow folks with mobility challenges to get out into nature more easily, more comfortably, and for a greater distance than if they had to cover the distance on their own.

Some locations have service roads to bird blinds which aren't usually open to the public. Does this location allow folks with access challenges to enter that **gated area** in their own vehicle if arranged ahead of time? If so, what is the procedure for seeking permission and unlocking the gate? (Please add that information to the comments section.)

Folks who want to spend half a day or longer, folks with small children, people with diabetes, and all those who get hangry may appreciate knowing that there are **meals available** on-site, or even vending machines for snacks.

Water is important for all of us! But if the only **water fountains** are inside the buildings, and the buildings are locked some of the time, this isn't so helpful. Having water fountains — and accessible water fountains for folks who use wheelchairs — available outside buildings is a wonderful feature.

Please note in the comments if the water is turned off during the colder

months of the year. (Although this might be obvious to locals, people traveling from warmer parts of the world may not be expecting this!) Is there any **loaner equipment** available? Binoculars may be appreciated by beginners and those who cannot afford optics; beach or all-terrain wheelchairs may create access to areas with different surfaces.

Information about these services should be easy to find on locations' websites and for visitors upon arrival.

3. Bathrooms

Is there a bathroom? Many people with disabilities and other health concerns may need to use one more often than those without disabilities.

Is it only accessible from inside the visitor center when it's open?

Is there an **accessible stall** or cubicle, or an accessible port-a-potty available? The stall size should be at least 60" x 60" (1.5m x 1.5m) to provide enough circulation space for a wheelchair to maneuver, or for a second person to assist with toileting and transfers.

Are there family or **all-gender bathrooms** available? (Are they accessible?) This can help make a location more welcoming for folks who are transgender or nonbinary... and can help with the longer lines often found in the women's bathroom...! They are also appreciated by people caring for someone of a different gender who needs assistance.

Are the doors into the bathroom and into the stall manageable?

The **door is not too heavy or awkward** to push or pull. The space in a **doorway should be 32 inches** (81cm).

Thresholds or lips can be challenging to get over if someone uses a mobility device, particularly if it is slanting or in a doorway.

Toilet height: The top of the toilet seat should be approximately 17-19 inches (43-48cm) from the floor. If it's too low, it can be really difficult to stand up from. If it's too low or too high, it can be difficult or impossible for someone to transfer to/from their wheelchair.

The **toilet paper** dispenser should be within easy reach of the toilet. Too close, and it may be obstructed by the person sitting on the toilet. If the

person has to reach/lean forward, the dispenser may actually be out of reach — many folks with spinal cord injuries or balance problems may not have the trunk support to reach that far without falling.

A **hook** that can be reached from a seated position inside the stall is helpful to hang coats, binoculars, hats, etc.

Sink: Often difficult for wheelchair users. If seated, could you reach the faucets? At most, the sink should be 34" (86cm) from the floor.

Faucets (taps): Ideally these have a long bar/handle that can be 'swiped at' with the back of your hand.

Many people cannot manage faucets that require two hands at once. Faucets that have small side 'wings' can be difficult or impossible to use, especially if stiff or turned off very tightly. They don't provide enough leverage or surface area to grip, so folks with decreased hand strength may not be able to manipulate them.

Hand dryers or towels should be within reach of a seated person, at most 35" (89cm) from the floor.

Mirrors should be seen from a seated position. The bottom edge should be no higher than 40" (101cm) from the floor.

4. Ramps

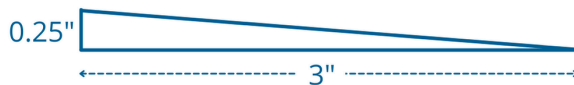
Gradient or Slope



According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Standards, slopes should be no steeper than:

Ramps

1:12 or 8% or 4.76°



This ratio means that for every 1 inch (or 1 foot, or 1 meter) of rise, only 12 inches (or feet, or meters) are travelled horizontally.

Slopes on trails or paths

1:20 or 5% or 2.86°



Neither of these slopes are very steep...!



Ramps are different to trail slopes (see question 7, below, for slopes). Ramps are usually short and often are near stairs, or going in to or out of a building.

Handrails can help walking people with mobility challenges managing the incline, and offer a guide for people who are blind or have low vision.

Width is important, so that wider mobility devices like power wheelchairs and scooters can use the ramp.

The [ADA Standards \(2010\)](#) state that **minimum slope (or gradient) is 1:12 (or 8%) for ramps**. "1:12" means that for every 1 inch of vertical rise, the ramp must travel at least 12 inches horizontally.

Some ramps may be steeper than this, but may be 'usable'. Other ramps are incredibly **steep**, and may be too difficult, or even unsafe, for some people to use.

According to the [ADA Standards \(2010\)](#), flat landings between slopes or at a **change of direction** should be 60"x60" (1.5mx1.5m). This provides enough

turning room for someone using a mobility device to shift direction. It also provides a 'rest area' on the way up or down the ramp.

The [Bubble Level for iPhone app](#) or [the equivalent for Android phones](#), is a free, simple app that can help determine gradient. When used on the Surface Level setting (swipe once), and your phone placed flat on the trail, the gradient in degrees will show. (This will only determine the gradient for that exact place on the trail, so try to measure it at the steepest part.) It doesn't work perfectly, but it may be of assistance. Available on iPhone and Android.

If you have a 24" liquid level and tape measure available, clear instructions on how to determine the gradient is available [here](#).

5. Trail surfaces

Concrete and **asphalt** are preferred, however roots and ruts can make them inaccessible.

Wooden **boardwalks** can be wonderful, but loose planks, holes or small steps at the beginning of them may make them unsafe or inaccessible.

Well-packed crushed stone or granite is okay, however lots of water flowing down them can create ruts.

Hard-packed soil paths are okay until it rains. Some people who use mobility devices will be strong and fit enough to manage this surface, but others may find it much more difficult. (This may depend on the distance traveled, too.)

'**Gravel-sized**' stone usually sits up on top of trail surfaces and is usually too large and movable for wheeled mobility devices to safely and comfortably travel over.

Rubberized surfaces, often used under new playground equipment to create a softer landing if someone falls, create a huge amount of friction for wheeled mobility devices and are not ideal.

Thick grass, mulch, or sand is usually impassable for mobility devices.

Muddy sections, protruding roots, rocks, ruts, and potholes can all block access.

6. Trail width and pull-outs

Width is important so wider mobility devices, like power wheelchairs and scooters, can travel easily on the trail. If someone is forced to leave the trail as a result of it being too narrow or due to an obstacle, they may have difficulty getting back *on* the trail. This could be a safety hazard!

36" (91cm) wide is the minimum; 60" (1.5m) wide is even better, as it allows to people to pass each other easily.

Are there **pullouts** along the trail? These wider sections allow people to move off the main trail so others can pass, and are especially helpful for wheelchair, scooter or walking frame users, or people who are slower walkers (perhaps due to pain or chronic fatigue). Ideally, they are available at least every 300 feet (100m).

7. Trail slope(s)

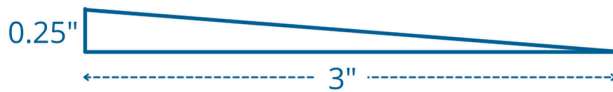
Gradient or Slope



According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Standards, slopes should be no steeper than:

Ramps

1:12 or 8% or 4.76°



This ratio means that for every 1 inch (or 1 foot, or 1 meter) of rise, only 12 inches (or feet, or meters) are travelled horizontally.

Slopes on trails or paths

1:20 or 5% or 2.86°



Neither of these slopes are very steep...!



The [ADA Standards \(2010\)](#) state that minimum slope (or gradient) is 1:20 (or 5%) for trails. "1:20" means that for every 1 inch (or 1cm) of vertical rise, the trail must travel at least 20 inches (or 20cm) horizontally.

The [Bubble Level for iPhone app](#) is a free, simple app that can help determine gradient. When used on the Surface Level setting (swipe once), and your phone placed flat on the trail, the gradient in degrees will show. (This will only determine the gradient for that exact place on the trail, so try to measure it at the steepest part.) It doesn't work perfectly, but it may be of assistance.

If you have a 24" liquid level and tape measure available, clear instructions on how to determine the gradient is available [here](#).

These slopes are ideal but rare. Many people with mobility challenges often encounter difficult slopes and can manage. However, people who may be new to using a wheelchair or who have a medical condition that causes

fatigue, for example, may not be able to manage difficult slopes independently.

Please include information in the Comments section of your Birdability Site Review if there are multiple slopes on a trail (one going uphill, for example, and one going down), and if the gradient is different on the different slopes.

8. Steps

Ideally, there are **zero steps**.

Many walking people say, "There's only one small step!" One small step may be manageable for a fit manual wheelchair user, but other wheelchair users may require assistance from a walking person. This removes their independence, thus removing the true accessibility of the location.

A '**mini step**' (1" or 2.5cm) is often present at the transition between trail surfaces and boardwalks. This is not ideal and can create an access barrier and a trip hazard.

If steps are present, **how many** are in each section? For people with mobility challenges, there is a big difference between going up (or down!) three steps versus twenty steps.

How high is the rise (the height you must step up)? Are all steps the same? Are the steps prone to getting **slippery** when wet? Is there a non-skid surface on the steps, or do they become very slick?

9. Benches

People with injuries or medical conditions causing fatigue or pain may appreciate the opportunity to 'take a load off', and others may appreciate the opportunity to enjoy the birds.

Are **benches** available? How frequently along the trail? Just at the trailhead? Every 500 feet (150m)?

Do the benches have an **armrest**? This is helpful for folks as they transfer from standing to sitting, and back to standing.

Benches should be **connected to the trail by a paved surface**. For people with mobility challenges, having a bench 6' (2m) away from the trail, over grassy or muddy ground, may make it inaccessible to them... even though they'd really like to have a rest!

Are there **picnic tables** or other rest areas available at the trailhead?

Do they have an extended table, so that wheelchair users can sit at the table easily?

10. Gates, bollards, or large obstacles

Those short pole-things (bollards) are sometimes placed at trailheads to prevent ATVs from using a trail. But one poorly placed bollard can be the difference...

Do **gates** or **bollards** allow or block access?

The [US Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines \(2015\)](#) state that the width of any opening be a minimum of 36 inches (80cm). It's worth noting that not all wheelchairs require this much space (Birdability founder Virginia Rose's wheelchair is 22 inches wide, for example), so please note how wide any openings are, in case that information is valuable to a particular user.

Bollards are short poles often used to prevent the passage of cars or other motorized vehicles. Some locations use one to prevent access, although often they then prevent access to mobility devices. Two bollards spaced at least 36 inches (80cm) apart is ideal.

What kind of gate is it?

Does it open like a door or a gate into a yard?

Is it a horizontal bar or hanging chain that blocks access to cars, but one that a walking person could bend down and scoot under? Some wheelchair users can manage this, but some cannot. (Power wheelchairs, for example, cannot bend!)

Is it a **chicane-style barrier**? These are designed to prevent bicycles from passing and require walking people to take a series of quick turns to pass. Wheelchairs cannot get through these!

Large obstacles may include **large rocks** used to prevent access at a trailhead.

11. Railings or safety barriers

A **small 'lip' on the edges of boardwalks**, approximately 1-2 inches (2.5-5cm) high, is very helpful to people using wheeled devices (including strollers) to keep them from inadvertently tipping over the edge of the boardwalk. They also help people who are blind or have low vision and who use a long cane easily know where the edge of the boardwalk is.

Railings on boardwalks or bridges should be positioned to optimize, not obstruct, the eye line of a seated person. For many people in a wheelchair, their eye line will be approximately 3 feet (1m). Railings should be below that to prevent them from being a visual barrier (ideally at 2 – 2.5 feet or 0.6 – 0.7m).

There are many ways to construct safety barriers to avoid using a thick, deep piece of wood for the top railing (and thus avoiding or minimizing any visual obstruction):

- Removing the visual obstruction entirely and replacing a section of the barrier with thick, clear plexiglass instead.

- Using narrow, vertical bars instead of thick horizontal bars.

- Using horizontal cables instead of planks of wood.

- Adhering the top plank to the top of the barrier so that the flat/wide side is facing the sky, rather than people.

12. Features for visitors who are blind or have low vision

Guide ropes along trails help people orient themselves and find their way independently. They may have large beads or other tactile markers to indicate to the visitor there is a sign or other point of interest coming up.

Is there a way to **hear the sign**? Are other languages available?

- Solar panels can power an audio recording activated by pushing a button.

QR codes can be scanned by smartphones and linked to an audio recording. This does not work if there is no or limited reception, or if visitors do not have a smartphone!

An audio guide can be downloaded from the location's website to visitors' smartphones.

Audio players/wands/pens can be loaned from visitor centers.

Do interpretive signs have **tactile features** (for touching)? This is educational for many visitors including kids!

Is there **braille** on signs? Some signs include braille for key information or just as labels.

Are there **tactile markers** on the trail's surface? These are raised dots or ridges that alert long cane users to upcoming hazards or where to orient themselves.

Are there other items available for loan from the visitor center? These may include large print or braille trail maps or booklets with interpretive sign information.

13. Shade

Is there ample **shade** along the trail?

Apart from the risk of skin cancer, most people like the choice of shade! Many people with conditions like lupus or multiple sclerosis should avoid full sun; it can have negative impacts to their overall wellness later that day or the following days.

During the warmest part of the year, is the trail shaded?

During the morning (when most bird outings are held) is it shaded?

What about during the hottest part of the day?

Are there areas that are well-shaded and areas that are exposed? Where along the trail are they, and how long do they last?

Do bird blinds or viewing areas have shade from roofs or nearby trees?

Do rest areas (including benches and picnic areas) have shade?

14. Trail use and popularity

How **heavily used** is the trail or birding location? This is valuable information for many folks including:

Autistic folks, who may find too many people overstimulating;

Combat veterans with PTSD, who may feel uncomfortable in crowded areas;

People who are immunocompromised and who don't want to be too close to others;

Birders and photographers trying to spend quiet time in nature!

Does visitor use change with the time of day? Is it busier in the morning or afternoon? Does it change with the season?

Visitor use may impact **parking availability**, which is particularly relevant for people who need accessible and van-accessible parking spaces to be able to visit the location.

15. Other trail users

Other trail users are not inherently bad! This is often useful information for folks to know ahead of time.

Mountain bikes may create ruts or muddy sections in trail surfaces that are difficult to travel over.

Cyclists, people using roller blades or skates, and in-line skiers may not warn other trail users and ride past all of a sudden. This can be scary for people who didn't know they were there, including folks who are Deaf or hard of hearing, or people with anxiety disorders.

Motor vehicles, including golf carts, may take up the entire width of the trail and make it difficult or impossible for mobility devices to pass.

16. Bird blinds

Are **bird blinds** accessible? Like any built structure, there are many factors that go into this:

The **door** is not heavy, awkward or difficult to open, and can be easily held open by one hand. This is particularly important for people using mobility devices.

There is little to no threshold step.

The entrance into the blind is wide enough (at least 32 inches).

There is enough **circulation space** for mobility devices, and interior benches or seats are easy to move.

The viewing **windows are low** enough for a seated person to see through, starting 30" from the floor.

Any shelves in front of windows do not prevent someone in a wheelchair from getting close enough to be able to see the ground directly in front of the blind. (Legs or struts under the shelves may prevent this.)

Roof or other structure provides shade. (See above for more on shade.)

17. Maintenance

No matter how accessible a location is, if it is not maintained it will not stay accessible.

Is the trail **plowed** after snow? If there is a plowing schedule, is this shared on the location's website so prospective visitors can make an informed decision about visiting after snowfall?

Are **leaves** removed regularly during autumn? Too many leaves and a wheelchair or walking frame will not be able to roll through them, and they create a slip hazard for walking people.

Are any grassy trail surfaces **mowed** frequently? Thick grass is difficult to roll over, and thick, tall grass can be impassable. Shorter grass also makes ticks and chiggers less likely — particularly relevant for people with chronic Lyme disease.

Are shrubs on either side of the trail **pruned** so as not to grow over the trail and reduce it's width?

Tree **branches** should not extend over any part of the trail at a height lower than 7' (2.1m). While sighted visitors may unconsciously move around these

hazards, people who are blind or have low vision may not realize they are there. No one wants to smack their head on an overhanging branch. Is the trail **surface intact**? Are there cracks, potholes, and roots pushing up on the trail surface? On a boardwalk, are any of the boards warped, or broken or have the nails come out of either end such that the boards curl up? Each of these can create trip hazards for any user and make it difficult to travel over.

18. Nearby noise

This trail is the Beaverdam Swamp Boardwalk at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Alabama. Lots of fun birds! It's worth noting, Freya McGregor's generalized ...

The noise level may make it difficult for anyone to hear or enjoy birds, especially for folks who are hard of hearing. People with auditory process disorders, autistic folks, and many others may find too much noise overstimulating and overwhelming.

How much **noise** can be heard? Proximity to busy roads, airports, factories, construction work, or nearby boats, dirt bikes, or farm equipment may create an unpleasant environment for someone with sensory processing difficulties. Do **large groups of people** often gather at this location? Birthday celebrations and extended family picnics are wonderful but may involve loud music and loud children, which can be overstimulating and uncomfortable for others. (See above for more on trail use and popularity.)

Proximity to police or public **gun ranges** and the sound of weapons being fired can be triggering to people with PTSD or who have experienced gun violence.

Not all sound is bad! Are there other opportunities for **sensory exploration**? This can be wonderful for anybody, especially some autistic visitors, people with sensory disabilities, and those with dementia.

Are there plants with strong smells or unusual textures?

Are there pleasant sounds nearby, like rustling leaves, a water feature, a gurgling creek, or wind chimes?

Are there brightly colored murals on building walls?

Are opportunities for tactile play available, like sand pits or muddy areas?

19. Potential safety concerns

Although some visitors might not be bothered by the presence of any of these, others may feel unsafe. We ask you to simply report on the presence of these factors, regardless of whether you feel bothered by them or not. Being informed ahead of time allows visitors to make their own decisions about visiting. For a thorough discussion about why this question is important to many people, check out [Why we have a safety question in the new Birdability Site Review blog post](#).

Well-used locations may feel more comfortable to visit, knowing others will be around if help is needed.

Locations that are **not well-used** may feel uncomfortable in case something goes wrong... or may feel more safe because visitors don't have to contend with others.

Nearby 'keep out' or '**no trespassing**' signs may signal to some visitors that locals are less welcoming and may be aggressive, even if the visitor has done nothing wrong.

Dogs off leash can jump and tip wheelchairs over. Even if the dog doesn't usually jump on standing people, they often jump up on wheelchair users, tipping them over. Some people have anxiety related to dogs, and dogs off-leash often scare away birds.

Well-lit parking areas and trails are comforting if visitors arrive in the evening or early morning and are likely to return to their car at dusk or later, or if going on an owl prowl.

The presence of **ticks or chiggers** is important for any visitor to know, but especially people with chronic Lyme disease who must avoid being bit by another tick.

Bears or mountain lions are a potential danger to any visitor! Their presence may be 'obvious' to locals, but people visiting from out of state or overseas may be completely unaware of them.

A noticeable presence of **police**, Border Patrol agents or other authorities can make places feel threatening or unsafe, especially for BIPOC visitors.

Isolated party spots near lakes or rivers may attract increased alcohol use and macho, sexist behavior, which many people — especially women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ folks — would rather avoid.

Seeing **hate symbols**, including certain graffiti designs and Confederate flags, at or near a birding location can make many visitors feel unwelcome and unsafe, especially BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ visitors.

Areas that are used for **hunting** may feel unsafe to people triggered by gun use. Visitors who are Deaf or hard of hearing may not hear the sound of guns being fired and realize they should move out of the area.

Evidence of recreational **drug use** may make someone feel unsafe. Used syringes create a puncture wound risk for anybody, and broken glass may puncture wheelchair tires, leaving the person stranded.

Thank you for learning more about the features that make up a truly accessible birding location. Advocating for accessibility improvements is an easy, helpful way to make a difference; many locations are grateful for the feedback and simply did not realize the issues. You can find a [template to use to advocate for accessibility improvements here](#).

If you know of additional access considerations we should add to this webpage and future updates of the Birdability Site Review, please [contact us](#)!