Hadley

Birding with Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, founder of Access Birding, Freya McGregor, joins us to discuss enjoying this hobby with blindness or low vision. Welcome to the show, Freya.

**Freya McGregor:** Thanks so much. It's great to be here.

**Ricky Enger:** It's really good to have you. This has been an often-requested topic, and it's not quite spring here yet, but I do still occasionally hear birds chirping. It's always such a lovely sound and I really look forward to learning a bit more about this hobby, because I'll confess, I don't know a lot. I have a lot of questions, but before we get into those, why don't you just take a moment to tell us a bit about yourself, who you are and what you do?

**Freya McGregor:** Sure. I am an occupational therapist. My background is in blindness and low vision services back home in Australia. I fell in love with an American soldier, and so I've lived in the US for the last seven years. As a disabled birder myself and an occupational therapist, I'm really interested in helping to increase the accessibility of birding spaces, like trails and parks and observation buildings and things like that, and birding programs. And helping to create a more welcoming and inclusive birding community so that more disabled birders can get out and be part of this lovely community and enjoy this really cool hobby.

I run a consulting business, Access Birding, working with nature organizations to increase access and inclusion for disabled birders. And I am a research associate at Virginia Tech working on projects related to access, inclusion, disability birding and using birding as a therapeutic tool, which is really cool.

I'm working on a book right now that will be published by Princeton University Press in a couple of years about accessible birding locations all over the US. So that's a pretty gigantic project. I'm trying to visit all the places that I include because a big barrier to lots of disabled birders is having access to the information that they need to determine if a trail or a car birding location is one that would be accessible to them. So, I'm trying to visit all these places, which makes for lots of awesome birding travel, but it's still a pretty monster project.

**Ricky Enger:** Right. I love that you keep mentioning access and inclusion because it is incredibly important. I think when people imagine birding, they have this idea of what it is, that's probably not accurate, because I've even heard people call this bird watching before, and so immediately I'm thinking as a person who's blind myself, I'm like, eh, that's probably not for me. And so, for somebody who doesn't have much vision, surely there's more to birding than just looking at pretty creatures. Can you talk a little about maybe just a better way to look at this that's more inclusive?

**Freya McGregor:** Absolutely. I'm actually really passionate about this. In the birding community, there has historically been a bit of a distinction between, quote, bird watching and birding. Birding was a new sort of term. Some folks really enjoy keeping a life list, which is a list of how many birds you've seen or heard in your whole life. And many people keep lists. They might have a yard list of all the birds that have shown up in their backyard, or people keep checklists for what they've seen or heard just on a particular trail today.

There was this difference between birding, which was sort of this listing, almost competitive kind of thing. And bird watching was seen as a sort of more relaxed, casual feeding birds in your backyard and just not really worrying too much about it. But loads and loads of people bird by ear. Most sighted birders bird by ear to some extent.

Different birds make different sounds and, if you learn the sounds, you can tell what bird is making which sound. Some species even look exactly the same, like really almost impossible to visually identify which is which. But the sounds they make, that's the thing that tells you which one it is.

Birding by ear is completely standard. It's not an extra thing. It's just part of learning how to identify birds. I'm really passionate about redefining birding as the act of enjoying wild birds. Because some people might not think they could be a bird watcher, but you can totally be a bird enjoyer.

**Ricky Enger:** Right. I guess if somebody's thinking about this and they like the sounds of birds, but don't know which bird is which, and have no idea how to tell the difference between all these birds. Or don't even know how to get started with this. It sounds cool, but where do I even go? Are there just some beginner resources, whether it's a book, a website, or somewhere that people can start diving in, in a way that's not super intimidating?

**Freya McGregor:** Yeah, absolutely. So, the recommendation is to get familiar with the birds that are local to you in your backyard, or that hang around in your neighborhood. When you get familiar with those birds, then you start noticing a difference. When you go to a different park or you go to a lake or the beach or the mountains, you'll start. Different birds live in different habitats and different birds live in different parts of the country and the world.

And because you are familiar with the ones close by, you'll tell really quickly when there's a difference. There are lots of different tools. There's a really great app that's free. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology created it, which is at Cornell University in upstate New York, a really big bird research institution. This app is called Merlin Bird ID, Merlin like the wizard. But in fact, it's Merlin like a falcon, which is a kind of raptor, like a small hawk.

Merlin Bird ID has photos of birds and descriptions and range maps. There'll be a text description of the bird's behavior. It often helps if you can see what they're up to or if someone's describing to you what the bird's doing as well as colors and size and shape and things like that.

The thing that's really cool about Merlin is it also has sounds that the birds make. Once you're in a species, like say, a northern cardinal, a really common bird in the Eastern US in lots of people's backyards, you can navigate to the sound bite of the northern cardinal kind of listing, and it'll have a series of recorded calls, because some birds make quite a few noises and you can play them and listen.

Now, good birding ethics says it's not really good to play bird sounds really loudly outside because you can distract birds from what they're doing, which is usually resting, or trying to find food, or nesting in the spring and summer. And we don't want to distract them. They might think that we're an intruder and they come to just defend their territory. And we don't want to do that because they've got stuff to do.

If you play a sound outside, turn your volume down a bit. Hold your phone close to your ear or something. But inside, go wild. And there's also a really awesome feature that's just come out in the last few months on Merlin, which is a sound ID feature. You start using the app, you start recording the sounds around you and it recognizes what birds are calling, and it tells you what they are, which is really a cool way to confirm something that you suspected. Like, I think that's a pine warbler, but let me just check. Merlin can tell you. It doesn't always get it all right. There’re frogs that sound like birds, and squirrels make all kinds of noises, and you can go chasing squirrels. And it turns out it's a squirrel, not a bird.

Merlin only does bird sounds at the moment. So, there might be sounds, you're like, why doesn't it tell me what this is? It doesn't recognize it yet. It doesn’t have all of the biodiversity there. But that's a really cool tool. Another fun little thing, and this is something you can just Google, there's lots of different mnemonics for learning bird sounds.

A mnemonic is like a rhyme or just a funny little phrase that helps you remember something else. So, there's these mnemonics for different bird sounds. They say Carolina wrens are these little feisty birds, they're in the Eastern US. They're often in backyards. They don't really mind humans. They make a lot of noise. That's a really good call to learn if you're in the Eastern US. They're loud and they're super feisty and they also make a few different calls. But one of them, they say that the wren says, "tea kettle, tea kettle, tea kettle."

**Ricky Enger:** Oh, right.

**Freya McGregor:** Sometimes you have to use a bit of imagination, but that's what they say. And if you can learn that little memory trick, that mnemonic, then when you hear the bird, you might be like, oh, hey, that's tea kettle. That's the Caroline wren. So, there's a whole stack of different mnemonics. I wouldn't Google it and try and learn them all off the bat because that's kind of overwhelming.

**Ricky Enger:** There's a lot, I'm sure.

**Freya McGregor:** But yeah, that's fun. And I just learned a new one recently. Tufted titmice, another really common backyard bird in a lot of the Eastern US, is also small, and makes a lot of noises. And I hadn't realized that a sound that I often hear in my neighborhood was a tufted titmouse, until I got out Merlin bird ID and it said that was a tufted titmice. I thought, oh gosh. Right. Someone just two days later happened to tell me, oh yeah, tufted titmice say, "Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter."

**Ricky Enger:** Oh wow.

**Freya McGregor:** That's exactly the sound I heard. There's always more to learn about birds, and that's something that makes it a really cool hobby. You can take it as far as you want, or not. You can just enjoy them for the sake of enjoying them, not worry about what they're called because they don't care what you call them. So, make up your own name.

**Ricky Enger:** That's a really great point because I think, at least for myself, when I think about birding, it really does seem intimidating, especially when I think about people I have known who do this. They have the binoculars and the camera and they have this field guide and this logbook so they can jot down what they found. And it's like this whole thing of, wow, it is a process and I better get out there and do it right if I'm going to do it at all. But that doesn't seem to be so accurate from what you've described so far.

With that said, I'm wondering if there is equipment or anything that you would recommend if somebody is birding. Are there things that can help, either with recording bird sounds, or taking things down? Or just something that might make it a little bit easier if you had any particular equipment?

**Freya McGregor:** Sure. Before I dive into the equipment, I just want to encourage you that because there are so many different ways to enjoy wild birds, none of them are more or less better than the other. And so, if you want to just go out and listen and it doesn't bother you that you don't know what the birds are called, I mean that's fine. Do that.

You don't have to have all the gear out. You don't have to know all the birds' names. You don't have to travel interstate or overseas. You just do whatever you want. Birds are there and they're awesome and you can enjoy them however you like. So please don't feel intimidated. We'd rather have you enjoy birds however you want than feel like you can't be part of this hobby.

Equipment. Yeah. A lot of folks use binoculars because they magnify the birds. You can see the bird in more detail. When you're trying to identify birds visually, some birds have little, they're called field marks, like different colors in different spots. Maybe their beak is a little bit different shaped. Binoculars make everything look a bit bigger. So, they're a helpful tool. Absolutely. But they're just a tool. They're not required.

Cameras. Yeah, sure. Some people really enjoy bird photography. Again, not required. Just fun if that's a thing you want to do. I know some folks with low vision really like being able to take photos of birds, because they can come home and put the photos on their computer and zoom in and really see more detail about the bird than they could when they were out in the field. For them, that's really exciting and something they really like to do. I mean, I have a camera, but that's because I enjoy photography. I don't take it out all the time, because sometimes I don't want to lug this giant heavy object around.

There's lots of folks who really enjoy recording bird sounds and there's lots of different microphones that could be used out in the field. I happen to work for a radio show and podcast about birds and conservation as well and I use my phone. We have this thing called audio postcards. If I'm hearing a bird making consistent noise and there's not too much background noise, like a big road nearby and trucks roaring up and down, I use the voice recorder, the voice memo app on my phone. I just start recording right there. These days phone microphones are pretty great. And the show, Talkin' Birds, by the way, there's a plug. It's a half an hour radio show. It's released as a podcast. Ray Brown's the host, and he's been doing this for a long time. He's been in radio longer than I've possibly been alive.

That's actually a fun tool, because he has a really great way of sharing information about birds that's interesting to people who have been doing it for a while, as well as not being too overwhelming or intimidating for new birders. So, Talkin' Birds, there's no g. Anyhow, you might hear my voice if you listen, because I send in audio postcards quite often just using my phone. I'll talk about what the bird's doing and where I am.

There's this really amazing database called Xeno Canto. It's X-E-N-O C-A-N-T-O. And I'm not sure if it's for all kinds of nature sounds or if it's just for birds, but you can upload audio recordings there and make them publicly available. The other place, and this is a tool too, eBird, is this massive database. Again, the Cornel Lab of Ornithology runs it, and that's where people can submit checklists of birds they've seen or heard in a particular location on a day. You can upload photos and audio there as well, and so there's this incredibly extensive library of audio recordings that anyone can access through eBird.org and hear all the different sounds that birds make.

That can get a bit overwhelming. That's why I'd use the app instead because they've selected the best quality audio. But it's kind of fun because a lot of folks enjoy that sort of citizen science. You're part of these incredible research projects just by sharing data about what birds are around you and the audio and stuff. So that's a fun thing too.

**Ricky Enger:** Oh, for sure. I think our show notes are going to be packed full of these resources, which is amazing. It's great to know that there is so much out there, and just in your describing this, I don't think anyone should feel limited because there are so many different ways to enjoy birds, record them, do whatever. Or just like to listen and that's as far as I want to take it. So that's awesome.

For a lot of people, they live in an urban setting. Maybe they're in an apartment complex and there's not really a backyard or something nearby, but they still want to be able to enjoy this. Travel might actually be a little bit difficult. But I mean, I feel like birds are everywhere. So are there ways that people, regardless of where they happen to be, can still step outside, and enjoy birding?

**Freya McGregor:** Absolutely. That's one of the cool things about birds, they're everywhere. Everywhere. Very much in urban settings. There's a species of bird called a peregrine falcon, and unusually it's found on every continent on the planet except Antarctica. There are peregrine falcons back home in Australia, and there're peregrine falcons in the US. They became really endangered in the 1970s, I think, when DDT was this pesticide that was used in a lot of farming. It turned out that it would get in the food chain. So, a peregrine falcon eats lots of prey, lots of smaller birds and other things.

This pesticide, the kind of toxic part of it, would get in the food chain and just builds up and builds up. By the time a falcon is eating it, they're consuming way high quantities. And peregrine falcons, bald eagles, I think American white pelicans and osprey, they're all big birds that ate lots of smaller things. It turned out DDT, when they laid eggs, it made the eggshells really thin, and the parents completely unknowingly would crack the eggshells just by sitting on them in the nest. It doesn't take very long when you have a bunch of birds who aren't having successful babies, because their eggshells are being cracked, the babies aren't hatching. All these birds became really endangered, and it was really, really bad. Then they banned DDT, and all these birds have made a huge comeback, which is really, really cool.

Peregrine falcons, so they're special for that reason, but they really like nesting on cliffs where there's a straight down, like this big epic cliff. It turns out that skyscrapers sort of pass as cliffs because they're really tall and straight up and down. In big cities, like New York and Chicago they make sort of canyons. There’re so many skyscrapers in downtown that there's almost a canyon where the street is. So, there's all these places, these big, big cities where there are peregrine falcons nesting up high on these tall buildings.

Even in Melbourne, where I'm from back in Australia, there's peregrine falcons on actually a few of the downtown buildings and they have nest cams. They have a camera set up to watch the nest. There's one in Boston, too, a nest cam on some peregrine falcons. That's a really fun way to enjoy birds from your computer because you can just open the YouTube streaming and you can see what's going on. And because these birds are raptors, they have to kind of baby their babies for quite a while. So, you get weeks of watching the little nestlings grow up and get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger before they kind of fledge and graduate out into the world. It also turns out, particularly in New York so I hear, there are so many pigeons.

**Ricky Enger:** Oh, right.

**Freya McGregor:** They're super easy prey. Pigeons are a common urban bird all over the world, and peregrine falcons really like eating them. All of this to say that there are birds absolutely everywhere, even in places that you wouldn't necessarily think.

If there's a local park or green space nearby, there's probably going to be more and different birds in that more natural space, especially if there's water. Because birds need plants, because that's where insects are, and that's food for a lot of bird species. So, parks are really great and urban parks. But even in really dense downtown areas, there are birds. Tune in, listen, and look up if you can, and you never know what you'll run into.

**Ricky Enger:** That's very cool. We've talked a lot about doing this sort of on your own as a solitary thing, which is perfectly fine. You're not having to organize something with somebody else. But I am wondering if there are some benefits to enjoying this as part of a group, and how do people actually go about finding somebody, or a group of people, who are into this hobby as well?

**Freya McGregor:** Yeah, absolutely. A really cool thing in the US is the National Audubon Society, which is a really big bird and conservation organization. There are more than 400 Audubon chapters all over the US with different Audubon chapters and different sizes. Very often, they are running bird walks, bird outings, birding events, workshops, online presentations advertised on social media or on their website or in their newsletter.

Beginners are almost always very, very welcomed. I've never seen something that said beginners are not welcomed. Sometimes they'll have a beginner bird walk specifically to start folks out. They won’t get too carried away and get too overwhelming with information, because there is so much to learn about birds. But yeah, Audubon societies and Audubon chapters. There's lots of bird clubs as well, local bird clubs. Nature centers and state parks often have programs, education, or interpretive programs, which are about birds or going out on a bird hike or something.

There’re loads of ways to get involved in the in-person birding community. And it's really fun. You don't have to. Plenty of people would rather go birding on their own or just with one friend, or a couple of friends, or whatever. But yeah, going on organized bird outings is really fun. I would encourage you. I've done a lot of work to help educate non-disabled members of the birding community about how to be more welcoming and inclusive of folks who might have different access challenges.

I would encourage you, if your blind or halfway visioned and you really want to go out on a bird outing, I'm sure it's not required at all, but it might be helpful to email ahead of time and see if you can get in touch with the outing leader and just let them know that you're coming, and there's nothing that they have to worry about. But just a heads-up, if they could help point out more birds that are making sounds than just the ones that you can see, that might help the outing leader make the event more enjoyable for you.

**Ricky Enger:** Excellent. I think if you're telling a group ahead of time or a leader ahead of time, “Hey, I'm going to be here,” it will at least give them an opportunity to think about birding in a way that maybe they don't all the time already. It could be beneficial for both of you. Maybe they think, “This is really visual for me, and of course I do hear birds, but I don't pay attention to it as much as I could.” Maybe, just having that as a part of the group and everyone is focused on listening as well as looking. I think it's a way that can bring people together and everybody benefits.

**Freya McGregor:** Yeah, absolutely. Sometimes for sighted birders, birding by ear feels like an advanced skill, they might know a few calls. I'm sort of new in this category. I'm very proud that I'm slowly getting more competent at identifying different birds by ear, but it's not something that's come as easy to me as identifying them visually.

So, lots and lots of birders want to improve their birding by ear skills for exactly the reasons that I just shared. There'll often be outings that are organized, workshops that are focusing on birding by ear. And so especially if you said, “Hey, it'd be really great if you can make sure to try and point out the calls as much for me.” The outing leader might really appreciate that opportunity to stretch their brain out a bit and stretch everybody else's brain out a bit too. For sure. Yeah.

**Ricky Enger:** Very cool. Well, this has turned out to be a far less intimidating and far more approachable hobby than I ever imagined, which is really, really great. I know that the audience is going to enjoy this as well. We have some people who are birding already, and some who are very curious about it and just weren't quite sure where to begin. So, this has been really informative. Is there anything that we didn't cover, or maybe just a bit of advice that you would leave people with as we wrap up?

**Freya McGregor:** Yeah. Backyard birding is a whole thing and feeding birds. Lots and lots of people, they might not think that they're a birder, but a lot of people feed birds in their backyard, and that's awesome and a great way to tune into the birds in your local area.

But yeah, there isn't a wrong way to do this. So please go out. We know there are so many therapeutic benefits to birding for our health and wellbeing. Listening to bird sounds can help reduce stress and a whole lot of other things. So, if you can, just get outside. Or if getting outside's hard, tuning into a nest cam or a feeder cam. There's lots and lots of them on the internet that you'll probably be able to hear some awesome sounds. And yeah, enjoy birds. It's so fun.

**Ricky Enger:** Love it. Thank you so much, and I can definitely hear the passion in your voice as you talk about this, which is always good. It's great to have someone who knows a lot about a subject and is clearly just hoping to share that with other people. So, thank you so much for taking a bit of your time and just sharing your expertise and your passion with us.

**Freya McGregor:** You're welcome.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's p-o-d-c-a-s-t@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 8-4-7 7-8-4 2-8-7-0. Thanks for listening.