

Seeing Through Sound: Reflections on Guiding a Birdability Companion

by Elizabeth Lamb

In order to prepare for the upcoming Birdability event, my friend Carla requested a companion to walk with her—and I was thrilled to join her. There's something uniquely powerful about sharing what we hear and see with someone else, especially when birding with a blind or low-vision companion. Carla's eagerness to grow her birding skills brought such a spark to the experience, and I found myself more aware than ever of what was happening around us.

I mentioned at the meeting last night that volunteering as a sighted guide comes with a surprising range of benefits. For me, describing in words what I'm hearing—translating the soundscape into language—forces me to listen more carefully and process more deeply. It becomes a richer, layered cognitive activity. Not only am I helping someone else experience birding, but I'm also sharpening my own awareness and appreciation of it.

We've found that birds can sound quite different depending on their environment. A cardinal calling from within a dense woods might sound more muted, while the same bird perched on a lone tree in an open field rings out bright and clear. So, describing the habitat—"woods on the left, field on the right, a pond just beyond"—adds yet another verbal layer to the experience. The weather, too, changes everything: wind can carry or muffle a song, and cold or rain add physical challenges that we either embrace or push through.

The beauty of all this is that sharing it—with a blind birder, a beginner, or any companion—enriches the experience for both people. It's a mutual exchange of perception, language, and wonder. It grounds us in the present, deepens our connection to nature, and often sparks lasting friendships.

To guide is to see the world in a fuller way—not just through sight, but through sound, sensation, and shared presence."