



OPINION Bo Beolens

“Attitudes can, and do, make a lot of difference to disabled people”



Disturbingly, last year the number of attacks on disabled people – just because they were disabled – increased! I believe this reflects the wide divisions in our society. When half the population prospers while the other half suffers, conflict rather than cooperation is society's knee-jerk response.

Some areas of life so lack diversity that outsiders become targets. Fifty years ago, unprovoked attacks on people because they were black or gay did not evoke outrage... It seemed OK to hate and for hate to manifest as violence. Sadly, while things have undoubtedly improved, 21st century Britain has not left this all behind; there are still causes and movements exploiting ignorance. Most younger people don't care what orientation or colour their fellows are and, particularly in cities, rich cultural mixes are appreciated, not feared.

Gay and ethnically mixed entertainers, politicians and other icons now abound. However, despite the popularity of the parallel Olympics and there being a few TV presenters and actors with visible disabilities, there are few disabled role-models or icons. The countryside and country pursuits still lack diversity. How many black or gay birders do you know? How few disabled birders have you seen?

Sexual orientation and skin colour have zero relevance to enjoying the outdoors, nor are they disadvantaging except by outmoded attitudes. Physical infrastructure is no barrier. However, while attitudes can, and do, make a lot of difference to disabled people, the lack of equality in infrastructure is literally the biggest barrier.

When I became involved in the cause, after thirty years of disability, I made polite enquiries and pleaded for greater

consideration. Two decades later I no longer do that, because nowhere near enough has changed. I've become strident and unapologetic. While I still hate, and am fearful of, confronting blatant ignorance and selfishness, I just 'go for it'. Asking long-lens lurkers to vacate the 'disabled priority' viewing bay is still met with reluctance or rudeness. Pointing out to a reserve warden that he is parking where he shouldn't still doesn't sink in, and legitimately driving where blue-badges may, I still encounter holier-than-thou trekkers looking down their noses, only reluctantly letting me pass. Behind the wheel I look able-bodied – you can't see my curved back until I stand – just like you can't spot a dicky heart or MS.

PROMOTING DIVERSITY

It's a vicious circle. If physical diversity is not catered for then disabled people don't turn up, so there's no need to provide access for them. Our anti-discrimination laws are weak; weakest for the physically different. Buildings requiring ramps and 'disabled' toilets hardly scratch the surface, or challenge our 'one size fits all' approach to provision.

Only a tiny percentage of those with mobility issues are wheelchair users, yet those who provide a few ramps are unduly smug. There is masses that could and should be done that, if planned in advance, is cost free. However, at best, service providers still only consult after draft plans have been drawn up. Changes are then hard to encourage and have cost implications.

I think that disability need not initially be addressed. We should instead promote diversity. For example, if a hide's shelf is too high, I cannot rest my elbows to steady my binoculars and see out of the viewing slot. I cannot get comfortable if the bench is one height and immovable. This applies to any young child or short



PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE TOMS, ILLUSTRATION: JOHN HOLCROFT



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person too! Provision mirrors history – until recently the average reserve wardens tended to be fit, able, flexible, tall men. Seating positions and viewing slots fitted them perfectly. Because they could walk a couple of miles without rest, there is no seating along paths. 'Wheelchair' slots have only recently become commonplace. However, there is still far less variability in provision reflecting the needs of our diverse, but fully able, birding public.

We should also confront the Orwellian assumption that exercise-takers are good, and those who struggle are bad people!

When benches are moveable, as in the best hides, and if viewing slots and elbow shelves vary in height, ALL of us are better served. Simple benches every 150 m along every track enable elderly walkers and tired kids to rest. Even, solid-surface, well-maintained paths enable pram pushers to venture further. If large kissing gates replace styles the temporarily injured can pass through. To put it another way, anything done for those with mobility issues also helps a great many more people, and NOTHING that is provided for disability access makes it any worse for anyone else. Catering only for the mythical 'average' person should be banished to history joining 'whites only' signs and 'queer bashing' as socially unacceptable, ignorance-inspired prejudice.

Many years ago, I visited Aransas, Texas, and climbed the three-storey ramped concrete platform to see Whooping

Cranes. My wheelchair-using friend got to the top to find he couldn't see over the parapet! My email was immediately responded to and within a week they installed a raised wooden platform; a week later a permanent concrete one was created. Three months after I complained about a hidden 'priority access' sign on a UK reserve, noone had even cut back the obscuring foliage. (I visited again days after drafting this piece... There was a new, large sign with the instruction: 'Please move your car to the car park when you have finished viewing' – in front of which was a parked car. When I later tackled the driver, he just smiled and said "we are leaving shortly" but then walked the circuit round the reserve!).

ENDURING ISSUES

Answer me this: why, at a popular RSPB reserve that permits blue-badge vehicular access, must one exit one's car and wheel into the reserve centre to ask them to unlock a gate when a 'blue-badge access only' sign would bar other vehicles?

Why, at a private reserve must you get your wheelchair out and wheel to the gate to open it, wheel back to your car, re-stow your chair and drive through, then repeat all those steps to shut the gate? It's not good enough! ■

Bo Beolens is best known as owner-operator of fatbirder.com, with thousands of pages on birding worldwide, and for his monthly magazine column 'grumpy old birder'. He is also the author of eight books and founder of 'Birding For All', a charity promoting barrier-free access. His previous profession was social work, community work and directing charities.

Find out more
www.birdingforall.com