

# Best Practice Guide

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For Reserve Managers



# Introduction

Birding For All's primary objective has always been to try and improve access to all facilities and resources that birders use, whether they be reserves and hides, birding equipment or accommodation and transport.

The aim of this document is to offer advice to reserve managers on some best practices that we believe will help ensure better access to reserves for everyone.

We are always happy to give further advice or undertake site assessments.



# Wheelchair Access

## HIDES

Observation hides, blinds and other viewpoints at nature reserves need to be assessed to enable wheelchair users to better use them. There are four main features that will need to be fully taken into consideration inside the hides. (Access to the hide itself also needs to be thought about carefully. Entry may be achieved either by offering ramped ingress or by ensuring that doors lead directly onto paths.) ALL four need to be addressed in some way.

**'Leg' Room** - There needs to be sufficient space under the window opening for a wheelchair user to get in as close as possible so that they can lean their elbows on the sill and this means a slot, for the front of the chair and the users knees. needs to be built into the hide structure. This needs to be roomy enough so as not to bash the users knees.

**Ledge Height** - The ledge below the window opening needs to be positioned at a low enough height for someone in a wheelchair to lean their elbows whilst in the sitting position of their wheelchair. This will likely conflict with 'Normal' window openings, as most wheelchairs are relatively low to the ground, so will need to be a separate section.

**Viewing Slot** – The viewing slot will also need to be at a lower position compared to the other hide windows, situated relative to the ledge/sill as mentioned above (probably being overall bigger than the 'normal' slots). It is also important to remember if there are covers, then their catches need to be accessible from a sitting position, something that is often forgotten.



# Wheelchair Access

## HIDES

**Removable Bench** – Although left to last this is a of primary importance with the ability to remove the bench (which must be light weight) then the wheelchair user will not be able to get their chair into position. A solution used by the best hides is a bench that bridges two others and has a top that can be folded on to one of them. This is ideal as it gives a wheelchair user access, but also means it can be folded back so a child can use the lower viewing slot, and because a removable bench may be very difficult for someone in a wheelchair to move out of the way.

**NB** One of the watchwords here is not just access, but *independent* access. When making provision assume that a wheelchair user cannot stand and is visiting alone.

# Footpaths

## PATHS

We all know that maintaining paths through nature reserves is a painstaking process, and while we can appreciate that aesthetically tarmac or concrete paths don't make for the most pleasing view on nature reserves, muddy paths are almost unusable by wheelchair users (and parents with push chairs!), but there are solutions to mud (or worse still gravel) paths.

**Surfaces** – It is important to know that a path with a loose surface where the loose layer is more than 10mm in depth is not a good surface for users in wheelchairs (or with buggy's etc.), so this needs to be considered

**Widths** – When thinking about what the width a path should be, allowance must be made for passing, wheelchair users, parents with pushchairs, partially sighted people with canes or dogs all need room to pass. Of course there will be times when narrower paths are unavoidable, in which case passing spaces should be considered elsewhere.

**Gradients** – The rise which a path takes must be carefully measured at regular intervals and where possible kept as low as possible, Ramps off paths into hides etc. should also be kept as shallow as possible as some wheelchair users struggle with steep gradients. 12% is about the ideal for independent wheelchair users.

**Boardwalks** – These are great resource (particularly in areas that are prone to flooding) but the distance between boards (e.g the gap) must be considered, and should be no more than 12mm across, apart from being tricky for wheelchair users those who may use a walking aid could potentially have real issues otherwise. For everyone boardwalks need to plan for wet or other slippery conditions. Covering with chicken wire is a relatively cheap solution giving a safe surface for wheels and feet.

**Overhangs** – it is important to keep overhangs above pathways as clear as possible. People with sight issues may not be able to clearly see low hanging branches, which could cause them a headache (literally).



# Footpaths

## RAMPS

When it comes to access to hides or viewing platforms its best to keep things on the level, but this can not always be the case. When a rise is required then stairs should be avoided at all costs, the best way to achieve access to these features is with the use of ramps, but it isn't as simple as that. Ramps need to be shallow enough to allow easy access. Propelling yourself in a wheel chair, or pushing one, up a steep incline (or push chair for that matter) can be hard work, or even impossible at times, but even if you manage to do this heading down a steep decline is down right dangerous.

**Gradient:** It is recommended to have as low a gradient as possible but they should not exceed 1:15 however 1:12 is our recommendation for safe easy access.

**Width:** A minimum width of 1.5 metres is recommended for wheelchair users.

**Platforms:** We recommend that a level platform should be positioned every 10 metres on longer ramps, it is advisable to make these wide enough to allow users to pass by with ease.

**Surface:** When it comes to ramp surfaces it is of vital importance that these are made with a non-slip coating (wooden ramps need something like a sand paper type finish etc.) Over time many surfaces can be worn smooth so periodic maintenance to ameliorate this may be called for.



# Barriers

## GATES

‘Barrier Free Access’ is the watchword but while we would all love open spaces without any barriers, at times there will be areas that need to be separated off from each other to control stock or other incursions. However it is important that there are breaches created in these that are made accessible to wheelchair users (as well as those with push chairs, walking aides etc.), therefore solutions such as styles or cattle grids are not recommended.

Large area kissing gates are available that allow a wheelchair or pushchair plenty of room to manoeuvre in order to pass through these gaps, they can keep the area separated off while allowing access.

Accessible kissing gates with small cattle grids beside them can speed up access for those who are can use them.





# Walking Restricted

## BENCHES

The single most useful enhancement for anyone who is 'hard of walking' is the provision of simple benches every 100m to 150m along the paths and tracks of nature reserves.

Many people who have restricted mobility find it hard to walk very far, either because they are very slow, very stiff, getting stiffer the further they walk, or who get more fatigued or in more pain the further they walk. On their 'good days' they may manage as much as 300 meters... but this is likely to be a round trip so 150m in one direction is a limit for many.

The provision of a bench means they can rest, 'unlock', recuperate and wait for the pain to go away before retracing their steps or pushing on to the next rest spot. It is vital that each resting place is measured accurately and the distance to the next stop is shown (obviously geography and conservation needs may inform the exact positioning, so 100m-150m is a guideline). If, for example, local conditions mean that there is a gap of three hundred meters to the next bench that fact must be made obvious so the person following the path can decide if they are able to go that much further without a rest. It is also important that the resting walker can view wildlife from where they rest. (If site diagrams or brochures show the reserve layout such benches should be named or numbered). Over and above any consideration for those with restricted mobility, quiet viewing positions benefit all and often viewing from a seat will disturb wildlife less especially when the skyline is being broken by anyone standing.

The minimum provision is a 'perch' this is a pole between two up-rights at a height where one can 'perch' rather than be fully seated.

Better still is a simple 'bench' of two uprights and a plank at 'normal' seat height (higher is better than lower as it is easier for people with mobility problems to rise from a higher position).





# Walking Restricted

## BENCHES

The absolute ideal rest stop is a bench that has some form of backrest... not only is this more restful, some people with balance issues will be unhappy where there is nothing to lean against.

In some places natural features (such as storm downed trees or boughs) are converted into rest stops. The most bird-friendly mobility aid we know of is a boardwalk that has 'lay-bys' with seating opposite handrails that act as small water troughs catching rainwater for birds to drink from... Sitting quietly on such a bench one may see songbirds etc. coming to these 'troughs'.



# Parking

## CAR PARKS

We have all seen disabled spaces in car parks the world over, they need to be wider to accommodate ease access to one's vehicle and closer to the amenities for ease of use for the patrons. However there can be issues.

**Monitoring** - All too often these spaces are not monitored in nature reserves and become a quick place for regular users to jump out for a quick check, or for staff and volunteers to park this needs to be monitored closely and discouraged.

**View Points** - Often there is potential to add a small stopping point for disabled vehicles to park and view areas that would be too far a walk from the car-park (Oare Marshes, pictured left, in Kent has such provision created through collaboration with Birding For All). These also need regular monitoring as they can be abused.

