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# Nurturing sociality with birdlife in the context of life with sight impairment: a role for nonhuman charisma

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## ABSTRACT

As increasing numbers of people develop sight impairments worldwide, an important body of research has examined emotional transitions experienced with the onset and progression of sight impairment. Many studies convey feelings of loss and social isolation, but there are growing concerns that the scripts of disability in this regard have become somewhat limited. This paper draws on the nature experiences of 31 people living with sight impairment in England to explore the value of nonhuman socialities, moving the 'social' beyond the typical realms of human-to-human interaction to foreground the importance of everyday birdlife encounters. For participants in this in-depth qualitative study – including people with congenital and acquired sight impairments – socialities nurtured through charismatic qualities of sound (termed 'sonic charisma'), scent and touch contributed to experiences of situated connectivity, characterised by playful moments of curiosity, companionship and awe. Reflecting on implications for nature engagement and conservation practices, the paper explores how such relationships could usefully be fostered within efforts to mainstream more inclusive nature experiences in the context of people's day-to-day lives and routines.

## Cultiver la sociabilité avec l'avifaune dans le contexte de la vie avec une déficience visuelle: un rôle pour le charisme non-humain

### RÉSUMÉ

Avec l'augmentation du nombre de personnes dans le monde vivant avec une déficience visuelle, un segment important de la recherche scientifique examine les transitions émotionnelles vécues par la survenue et l'installation d'une déficience visuelle. Beaucoup d'études traduisent un sentiment de perte et d'isolement sociale, alors que de nombreuses voix s'élèvent pour exprimer les limites de ces textes relatifs au handicap. Cet article s'appuie sur les expériences de la nature vécues par 31 personnes vivant avec une déficience visuelle en Angleterre pour explorer la valeur des sociabilités non-humaines, déplaçant le « social » par-delà les

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## MOTS-CLEFS

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

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domaines typiques de l'interaction entre humains pour souligner l'importance des relations quotidiennes avec les oiseaux. Pour les participants à cette étude qualitative approfondie – comprenant des personnes ayant une déficience visuelle congénitale ou acquise – la sociabilité cultivée à travers les qualités charismatiques du son (appelées « charisme sonore »), l'odorat et le toucher contribuent à l'expérience d'une connectivité située, caractérisée par des moments ludiques de curiosité, de camaraderie et d'admiration craintive. Avec une analyse des implications pour les pratiques de conservation et de mobilisation en faveur de la nature, cet article explore comment de telles relations pourraient être utilement développées au sein des efforts pour intégrer des expériences de la nature plus inclusive dans le contexte de la vie quotidienne et des routines individuelles.

## **Nutriendo la socialidad con las aves en el contexto de la vida con discapacidad visual: un papel para el carisma no humano**

### **RESUMEN**

Con un número creciente de personas que viven con discapacidad visual en todo el mundo, un importante cuerpo de investigación ha examinado las transiciones emocionales experimentadas con el inicio y la progresión de la discapacidad visual. Muchos estudios transmiten sentimientos de pérdida y aislamiento social, pero hay una creciente preocupación de que las narrativas de discapacidad en este sentido se hayan vuelto algo limitadas. Este artículo se basa en las experiencias en la naturaleza de 31 personas que viven con discapacidad visual en Inglaterra para explorar el valor de las socialidades no humanas, moviendo lo 'social' más allá de los ámbitos típicos de la interacción entre humanos para destacar la importancia de los encuentros cotidianos con las aves. Para los participantes en este estudio cualitativo en profundidad, incluidas las personas con discapacidades visuales congénitas y adquiridas, las socialidades cultivadas a través de cualidades carismáticas del sonido (denominado 'carisma sónico'), el aroma y el tacto contribuyeron a las experiencias de conectividad situada, caracterizada por momentos lúdicos de curiosidad, compañerismo y asombro. Reflexionando sobre las implicaciones para el compromiso con la naturaleza y las prácticas de conservación, el artículo explora cómo tales relaciones podrían fomentarse de manera útil dentro de los esfuerzos para incorporar experiencias de la naturaleza más inclusivas en el contexto de las vidas y rutinas cotidianas de las personas.

## **Introduction**

Approximately 253 million people worldwide are estimated to experience sight impairment (Bourne et al., 2017). These numbers are predicted to increase with our ageing populations and the rising incidence of underlying causes of sight loss (e.g. diabetes). With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that a growing body of literature has examined the myriad emotional transitions that can be experienced following the onset

of sight impairment (Thurston, Thurston, & McLeod, 2010). Many studies convey experiences of loss, including a loss of independence, confidence and social relationships as individuals adjust to a new way of 'being' in the world (Nyman, Dibb, Victor, & Gosney, 2012). In a survey of people living with sight impairment in the UK, four in ten respondents reported feeling moderately or completely cut off from the people and things around them, and over a third reported sometimes, frequently or always experiencing negative attitudes from the general public in relation to their sight impairment (RNIB, 2015). Recognising the detrimental impacts of such attitudes, this paper moves the 'social' beyond the typical realms of human-human interaction to consider the importance of nurturing *nonhuman* socialities, drawing on the experiences of people with sight impairment. Nonhuman socialities are defined by Davidson and Smith (2009, p. 899) as 'an emotionally experienced being-with-others who are more-than-human', including plants, animals or even fungi. Broadening this conception of non-human sociality, this paper examines how socialities forged with everyday *birdlife* can contribute to playful moments of curiosity and companionship, alongside deeper experiences of awe, care and respect; positive encounters that are often under-explored within existing social and cultural geographies of disability. Before discussing these further, I elaborate on the detrimental impacts of negative social attitudes on everyday experiences of disability, and highlight calls for more affirmative models that understand impairment and disability as difference 'to be expected and respected on its own terms, as an ordinary part of human experience rather than inevitably as misfortune' (Cameron, 2014, p. 24).

### ***Seeking affirmative models of disability***

The prevalence of negative attitudes around sight impairment stems in part from the tendency to locate disability *within* the body, failing to acknowledge the disabling influence of oppressive social and physical environments that unnecessarily restrict life choices for people with impairment (Butler & Bowlby, 1997; Kitchin, 1998). This *biomedical* approach to disability has led to the dominance of what prominent Critical Disability Studies scholar, David Bolt, refers to as 'normative positivisms', whereby the most common or 'typical' way of perceiving the world is valued over other modes of perception (Bolt, 2019). Socially entrenched normalcies (in this case, the hegemony of vision) are affirmed as a desirable 'standard', with deviations from this standard or norm (described by Bolt as 'non-normative negativisms') deemed somehow inferior or inadequate. These social dynamics catalyse a form of disablism, whereby embodied difference is problematised and alternative ways of perceiving the world are devalued in relation to the norm (Bolt, 2019). People experiencing the onset or progression of impairment are often said to have crossed a normative divide, with normative pasts 'displaced by a non-normative present marked by residual existence' (Bolt, 2019, p. 52). Those internalising these ideas may seek to emulate more socially accepted 'standards', over-achieving in an effort to 'prove' their worth in socially normative terms (Reeve, 2014). Such efforts generate sensationalised 'supercrip' stories that capture attention precisely because 'disabled bodies are understood as incapable of physically demanding activities' (Ray, 2017, p. 40). Disability Studies scholar, Alison Kafer (2017, p. 221) has therefore called for more attention to the stories that 'get effaced by this focus on the supercrip's achievements'.

While the *social* model of disability has been paramount in shifting the focus from overly medicalised, individual bodies to the exclusionary (disabling) qualities of our everyday physical and social environments, it still tends to perpetuate a negative view of disability as ‘an oppressive, restrictive social relationship’ (Cameron, 2014, p. 25). Without denying negative experiences of impairment and disability, Swain and French (2000, p. 569) sought to balance such approaches with ‘a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective’. In this regard, there have been growing calls to understand and affirm disability in terms of alternative lives and values. Most recently, David Bolt developed a tripartite model of disability, which encourages more critical attention to the ways in which ‘non-normative positivisms’ – *affirmed* deviations that ‘neither reinforce nor reify normative standards’ (Bolt, 2019, p. 7) – cut across the continuum of dominant normative positivisms and prominent non-normative negativisms. This focus on non-normative positivisms allows for a more expansive sense of the human body, for example, recognising blindness not as the loss of sight but as:

*An occasion to make the visual present through means other than sight. The senses of touch, smell and hearing can bring one into touch with the never-ending movement of the visual (Michalko, 1999, p. 123).*

When discussing the onset of sight impairment, people frequently lament the loss of sight but rarely explore the benefits of ‘gaining blindness’ (Kleege, 2018, p. 9). Recognising this, autobiographical accounts have been written with the aim of providing more nuanced insights of blindness that move beyond ‘the old clichés that equate blindness with ignorant despair’ (Kleege, 1999, p. 228). As noted by prominent writer, speaker and disability activist, Eli Clare (2017, p. 26):

*For those of us with congenital conditions, disability shapes all we are. Those disabled later in life adapt. We take constraints that no one would choose and build rich and satisfying lives within them. We enjoy pleasures other people enjoy, and pleasures peculiarly our own.*

Yet accounts of these pleasures, and the rich and satisfying lives they can contribute to, tend to be overshadowed in the wider disability literature by stories of loss and exclusion, with a culturally entrenched absence of discourses linking happiness and disability (Bolt, 2019). More affirmative models are therefore needed that respect disability as ‘a site of mutually beneficial interconnections, richness and artful living’ (Bolt, 2019, p. 67), attending to positive relational configurations in which people come to transcend the oppressive social norms they are otherwise expected to aspire to.

I respond to these calls in this paper, drawing on the findings of an in-depth qualitative study exploring how 31 people with varying forms of sight impairment, living in rural and urban areas of England, describe their experiences with diverse types of non-human nature. I focus on the day-to-day social interactions that contributed to feelings of positive connection, pleasure and meaning amongst the study participants, moving the ‘social’ beyond the typical realms of human-human interaction to consider the importance of socialities experienced with everyday birdlife. These socialities unfolded both momentarily through fleeting, unanticipated encounters, and over time in the context of longer-term relationships and entanglements.

### ***Non-human socialities, impairment and disability***

A growing body of literature outside of disability studies has examined the potential benefits of engaging with nonhuman life, including myriad plants and animals. Participants in these studies have described experiences of care, companionship, awe, wonder, and a sense of agency and purpose (Bell, Westley, Lovell, & Wheeler, 2018). These findings are typically linked to contexts of gardening (Milligan, Gatrell, & Bingley, 2004), citizen science (Dunkley, 2018), wildlife tourism (Curtin, 2009), care farming (Gorman, 2019; Kaley, Hatton, & Milligan, 2019), and other forms of nature-assisted therapy (Annerstedt & Währborg, 2011). Within the disability studies literature, there is growing interest in the relationships forged between guide dogs and their owners (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011; Whitmarsh, 2005). These have been most clearly articulated within autobiographical accounts of blindness. For example, Michalko (1999, p. ix – xi), describes the ‘grace’ that imbued his relationship with his guide dog, Smokie, a relationship that transformed his understanding of blindness:

*He gave me a sense that blindness meant something more than the inability to see ... Smokie has taught me that far from being a handicap, far from being an impairment or disability, blindness is an occasion for me to make a place in the world and to be decisive about it.*

Similarly, Kuusisto (2018) describes the affection between himself and his guide dog, Corky, as a ‘mutual discernment’, noting an important transformation from life as a ‘tippy-toe walker’ to feeling ‘vital’ in his footfalls, which he attributes to ‘a dog-driven invitation to living full forward’ (Kuusisto, 2018, p. 63). He describes how the liberation, confidence and mutual sense of security experienced with Corky allowed him to live ‘the chaos of joy’ (Kuusisto, 2018, p. 154), and explains how guide dogs can ‘entice you back into the world’ (Kuusisto, 2018, p. 181).

Beyond these so-called ‘man-dog arrangements’ (Kuusisto, 2018, p. 58), however, there is limited consideration of the role of nonhuman socialities in the everyday lives of people with sight impairment, or disability more broadly (Davidson & Smith, 2009). Where disability has been considered, studies have tended to focus on more structured care-oriented animal assisted interventions (e.g. equine therapy, O’Haire, 2017), alongside general barriers to nature access (Burns, Paterson, & Watson, 2009; Horton, 2017), and the challenges faced in negotiating prohibitive risk cultures amongst outdoor activity providers (Burns, Watson, & Paterson, 2013; Tregaskis, 2004). As discussed in detail elsewhere (Bell, 2019a, b), time spent with nature can both reinforce prominent ocular-normativisms and provide a sense of freedom from identity limiting stereotypes amongst people with sight impairment. If we are to maximise opportunities for the latter and encourage the development of positive nonhuman socialities, we need to engage with and ‘imagine a cripp interaction with nature, a cripp engagement with wilderness, that doesn’t rely on either ignoring the limitations of the body or triumphing over them’ (Kafer, 2017, p. 221). Macpherson (2008, 2009) goes some way to doing so in her study with sight-impaired walkers in the English Lake and Peak District National Parks. Macpherson (2009, p. 1050) emphasises the ‘intercorporeal’ qualities of these landscape experiences, demonstrating how:

*Landscape emerges intercorporeally through a tangible connection between guide and walker, through group practices in the landscape which stay with us in habitual ways, and through historical relationships with one's own embodied past.*

In this way, Macpherson foregrounds the human-human socialities that shape walkers' experiences within the two national parks, highlighting how 'belly laughs, titters, giggles, anxious exhalations, and guffaws would reverberate through the country air on days out walking' (Macpherson, 2008, p. 1081). While inanimate nature encounters, such as rocky or 'sticky' muddy terrain, often contributed to these socialities, limited attention was paid to the animate *non-human* socialities unfolding during the walks.

This paper aims to move discussions beyond the guide dog-owner relationship and walker-landscape encounters to explore the importance of more ephemeral nonhuman socialities amongst people living with sight impairment. Reflecting a growing interest in human-bird relationships (Hedblom, Knez, & Gunnarsson, 2017; Ratcliffe, Gatersleben, & Sowden, 2013), I focus primarily on the importance of everyday birdlife encounters as the most commonly discussed form of nonhuman sociality across the study participants' narratives. For many, these socialities contributed to uplifting experiences of situated connectivity (Ryan, 2012), characterised by playful moments of curiosity and companionship, experiences of awe and wonder, and opportunities for deeper reflection on what it means to be alive, promoting a shared sense of existence and interconnection with the world. To examine how such socialities emerged, I draw on Lorimer's (2007) concept of 'non-human charisma': 'a multivariate property comprising the ecological and aesthetic properties of an organism and the diverse affective responses these engender in encounters with humans' (Lorimer, 2010, p. 317). This concept captures three dimensions of a nonhuman encounter: (a) *aesthetic* charisma – the visual characteristics of an organism, including its appearance and behaviour, that tend to generate strong human responses, such as the large eyes of a panda; (b) *ecological* charisma – the detectability of an organism to the human senses, often based on visible indications of its size, colour, shape, speed and type of movement; and (c) *corporeal* charisma – the feelings evoked in humans through one-off or repeated encounters and interactions (Lorimer, 2007). Importantly, charisma is not a characteristic of a particular animal/organism, but rather 'something that is created between bodies' (Bull, 2014, p. 77), human and nonhuman. Rather than focusing on visual aesthetics of encounter, I foreground the importance of an as yet under-examined dimension of nonhuman charisma, referred to here as 'sonic charisma'. In doing so, I explore the more fleeting, sonorous qualities of these nonhuman encounters and how these are enhanced by lesser examined senses of scent and touch.

## Methodological approach

This paper is informed by the findings of an in-depth qualitative study, called 'Sensing Nature', examining how people with varying forms of sight impairment in the UK have come to experience a sense of wellbeing (or otherwise) with diverse types of nature during the life course. The study was guided by four overarching research questions: (a) What is 'nature' to people with diverse forms of sight impairment? (b) What types of encounter promote a sense of wellbeing and meaningful connection with nature? (c) To

what extent, if at all, do people feel impaired with varied forms of nature and how might this change over time? and (d) What could we learn from these ways of sensing and making sense of nature? These questions were explored using in-depth, qualitative methods, encouraging people to describe their experiences on their own terms, facilitating valuable insights into the challenges, pleasures and complexities of life with sight impairment (Duckett & Pratt, 2001). Ethical approval for the study was secured from the University of Exeter Medical School Research Ethics Committee (Approval Reference Dec16/B/108).

I conducted two parallel phases of fieldwork from February to December 2017 and kept a field diary throughout to capture key reflections, observations and participant discussions after each day in the field. In Phase 1, I participated in sight loss awareness and sighted guiding training, before volunteering with a range of activity groups around the UK, including gardening, walking, social and rifle shooting clubs. As a researcher without sight impairment, joining in with over 15 full day activity sessions provided a valuable opportunity to recognise and confront some of my own misperceptions and assumptions about sight impairment. Being open about my own positionality and demonstrating a genuine commitment to working with participants to counter identity-limiting stereotypes of sight impairment and nature through the project's outreach and impact-oriented activities was essential in building trust as the research developed. Participants taking part in the Phase I activities referred to their visual perception in varied different ways – from people self-identifying as 'registered blind', 'visually impaired', 'vision impaired', 'sight impaired', 'partially sighted' to those adopting the dual meaning of the 'VIP' acronym, 'Visually Impaired Person' and 'Very Important Person'. Early discussions suggested value in referring to 'sight impairment', as a term that lacks some of the negative stereotypes of 'blindness' described by Bolt (2016), as well as the somewhat unhelpful connotations of impaired *insight* associated with the term 'vision'. Whilst I therefore use 'sight impairment' as an umbrella term in this paper for consistency, I prioritised each participant's preferred language and terminology throughout the fieldwork activities.

In Phase 2, I conducted in-depth one-to-one interviews with 31 people recruited from across England, with assistance from the Royal National Institute of the Blind 'RNIB Connect' magazine, the Thomas Pocklington Trust, Blind Veterans UK, the Macular Society, and several local sight loss organisations who raised awareness of the study through their member networks. Purposive sampling allowed individuals at different life stages, and with diverse forms of sight impairment, to contribute 'information rich' views to the study, rather than focusing solely on the 'typical' or average case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The sample included: 15 men, 16 women; aging from mid-20s to mid-80s; living in rural areas, towns and cities; seven participants in full or part time employment, 14 retired, 10 unemployed, and 18 dedicating time to volunteering; 24 participants with a higher education qualification. Participants described varied conditions influencing their field and clarity of vision, including colour, light, depth and object perception (glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa, diabetic retinopathy, congenital cataracts, retinopathy of prematurity, Leber's Congenital Amaurosis, Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy, coloboma, retinal detachment, rod-cone dystrophy, and sight loss caused by accident and/or brain injury). Of the 31 participants, 28 were registered either severely sight impaired or sight impaired, with the remaining three contemplating registration.



Fifteen participants were born with at least one eye condition, including 12 people who had experienced further sight changes later in life. An important limitation of the sample is its relative homogeneity in terms of race, ethnicity and cultural background, with 29 participants identifying as White British and two as Asian British. Although introducing the study sample in this way, I appreciate the fluidity of people's identities and am hesitant to construct people first and foremost by impairment; such tendencies reduce 'the complex person to a single attribute' (Bolt, 2016, p. 10), rather than understanding people – and their nature interests and experiences – to be as idiosyncratic as anyone else (Richards, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010). Whilst wary of flattening differences across participants with varying histories of sight impairment, I have tried to focus this paper on the diverse 'birdy' socialities discussed by participants and the strategies adopted to maximise opportunities for these encounters in everyday life.

All 31 participants took part in an initial narrative interview (Riessman, 2008), lasting between one and three hours. In this interview, I encouraged participants to reflect on what nature is to them, how they experience and negotiate different types of nature during their day-to-day lives, changes through key life transitions and 'chapters' of their lives, and their perceptions about existing efforts to support more inclusive multisensory nature encounters. These narrative interviews offered valuable insights into how people's wider life circumstances had influenced their nature conceptions, experiences and embodiments. Twenty-five of the 31 participants took part in a second 'go-along' interview (Carpiano, 2009) within a setting they valued for encountering nature. These 'in situ' interviews offered emplaced insights into myriad socialities and practices shaped by and with nonhuman others, alongside valuable prompts to discussion (Bell, 2019a). Interview locations included participant gardens, local residential road/path networks, urban parks, woodland, coastal and countryside areas, with interviews lasting from twenty minutes to four hours according to participant preference. Participants indicated how, if at all, they would like to be guided during these interviews (Bell, 2019a), and guiding preferences varied during each interview with shifting terrains, weather, presence of other people and traffic.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were anonymised (pseudonyms are used throughout this paper) and annotated to capture expressions of emotion such as pauses, sighs, frustration, laughter, tears, hesitation or changes in tone. Organising the data using Nvivo 10 (qualitative data management software), I conducted in-depth inductive analyses on the Phase 1 and 2 field diary entries and Phase 2 interview transcripts. During this process, I applied multiple lenses (macro, meso, micro, interactional, temporal and spatial) to the data in order to situate participants' nature experiences in the personal, social, cultural and physical contexts of their day-to-day lives (Pamphilon, 1999). Through this analytical process, the social importance of nonhuman encounters became apparent, particularly with nearby birdlife, and participants described diverse strategies for engaging with – and even encouraging – these socialities during their everyday routines and activities.

After discussing these early findings with both sight loss advocacy and environmental conservation organisations, I organised a parallel stream of impact-oriented activities, in line with the broader commitment of the research to prioritise the generation of meaningful and accessible knowledge with the potential to both counter and transform the dominant influence of disabling norms and cultures (Barnes, 2014). This stream of

work – named ‘Nature Narratives’ – involved close collaboration with a national audio description charity, an independent visually-impaired coach and sensory facilitator, and a national nature conservation charity. We worked together to co-design and deliver tailored sensory awareness and audio description training workshops and written training materials at four contrasting case study sites around the country. These included a coastal country park, historic parkland and heritage gardens, an ancient semi-natural woodland reserve, and an extensive reed-bed wetland reserve. Building on the production of inclusive design guidance (Bell, 2018), the aim of this additional work was to support staff and volunteers at varied natural heritage sites to promote more inclusive multisensory nature experiences amongst people with sight impairment, whilst also raising awareness of these types of settings as places for everyone (Bell et al., 2019). In this paper, I draw on both the research findings and the experiences of those taking part in this additional work, to examine the importance of engaging with and nurturing birdy socialities within efforts to facilitate more inclusive, enriching relationships with nonhuman nature in collaboration with people living with sight impairment.

## Findings and discussion

Given the risk of increased isolation amongst people with sight impairment (RNIB, 2015), it is important to understand how some people retain a sense of connection, be it with human and/or nonhuman others. Here I examine the role of sound – in concert with the wider senses – in shaping how and why nonhuman socialities with nearby birdlife can contribute to uplifting experiences of situated connectivity amongst people with sight impairment. After characterising these birdy socialities, I discuss the practical implications of the findings in terms of opportunities to move beyond the provision of segregated disability ‘access’ to nature (Bell, 2018, 2019b; Bell et al., 2019) in order to facilitate genuinely inclusive nature experiences and connections.

### *Sonic charisma: the sociality of human-birdlife encounters*

As noted by Gorman (2019, p. 10), relationships with nonhuman others are often ‘resonant and sonorous’ rather than just visually or physically mediated. Indeed, ‘because everything engages sound, sound acts to link and collectivise bodies and environments’ (Gallagher, Kanngieser, & Prior, 2017, p. 626). With almost 600 native bird species within the UK alone, it is perhaps not surprising that many participants emphasised the importance of bird songs and calls in their interviews; this was partly in creating a ‘living or vital natural environment’ (Ratcliffe et al., 2013, p. 222) but also by enhancing their sense of the environments around them. For example, Alva, a participant in her 80s, explained ‘*when you can’t see anything, the smallest sounds, especially if they’re birdsongs, are very very special*’. As noted by Rodaway (1994), visual interactions with the world can generate feelings of permanence, with other sensory inputs often experienced as more ephemeral or fleeting. With the loss of sight, one’s stability and continuous stream of sensory information can therefore feel compromised, until people learn to tune into the wider multisensory world of ‘happenings’ or movement (Hull, 1990). Reflecting this, one participant, Quinn, explained:

*I mean they say when your eyesight goes, your other senses improve – they don't. You use them more to listen to what's happening around you, so that you end up hearing the things that you never bothered to hear before. And they sort of, they rise in importance ... the two main ones are touch and hearing. The hearing, to me, is enhanced by the background noise ... you'll be walking down through the woods, you'll hear the birds in the background ... and it fills that sort of ((pause)), space where there'd be nothing. Not that you have to fill it, but it's nice to have something to fall back on ... I mean, there are buzzards that nest up in these big trees, just up here to the left. And the fights between them and the crows are interesting because the crows don't want them in the area but the buzzards want to be in the area, so eventually the crows give up. And even things like, at the beginning of the year there's always three buzzards that turn up because that's last year's youngster. But it has to be pushed out so that they can carry on, because they mate for life, and so they reject it. It has to go and find its own mate and all the rest of it. But it's a bit heart-breaking at times, when you hear it (Quinn, male, 60s, acquired progressive condition, partial sight).*

In this quote, Quinn emphasises the importance of being attentive to birdlife across the senses, highlighting this as a sensitivity to 'work at', developing new embodied dispositions to engage with nonhuman socialities as they unfold, in this case through sound. Quinn highlights how he and his wife deliberately tune in to the sonorous tensions between the local crows and buzzards and within each buzzard family, coming to recognise the family dynamics and stories of different species and individuals over time.

The distinctive sounds of crows – a relatively common bird in the UK – were picked up on by several participants during the study. For example, one participant, Seth, commented:

*Walking down the lane the other day, I think it was Saturday, there were some really – I guess they were crows – the other side of the hedge. It was almost like there were two gangs of them having a real good argument. Waw! Waw! All that going on, it was fascinating! (Seth, male, 50s, no sight since accident).*

Diverging from previous studies that have denigrated the calls of crows and other 'squawky' birds as raucous and irritating (Ratcliffe et al., 2013), many of the Sensing Nature participants took pleasure in these birdy socialities within moments of creative anthropomorphism. Whilst the practice of anthropomorphism has been critiqued as a 'crude projection' of humanism (Keul, 2013, p. 948), it also allows such animals to be perceived as 'similar beings-in-space' (2013, p. 943). Indeed, it has been argued that 'the attribution of human emotions, characteristics, and behaviours to non-humans (fictitious or not) is crucial in creating meaning and value in human-animal encounters' (Gorman, 2019, p. 10). Many participants engaged in these acts of creative anthropomorphism upon encountering particularly distinctive sonorous exchanges between different animals. For example, one participant, Abbie, joked about the 'elitist bird club' at her local duck pond:

*I went round the local park yesterday ... and you could hear all these different birds, because they have all these incredible birds that go there. I'm sure it's a, you know ((laughs)), very sort of elitist bird club. Very very specialist. Certain egrets don't get in. "One cormorant at a time!" (Abbie, female, 40s, acquired progressive condition, partial sight).*

The sonorous socialities unfolding between the birdlife at the duck pond sparked Abbie's imagination, inspiring humour and stories about the possible lives and lifestyles of these local birds. This tendency to engage in storytelling and creative

anthropomorphism while interpreting such nonhuman encounters reflects the importance of stories in how people make sense of the world. As noted by Frank (2010, p. 47) ‘people not only think about stories; far more consequentially, people think with stories’. Indeed, ‘stories have the capacity to arouse people’s imaginations: they make the unseen not only visible but compelling’ (2010, p. 41).

Together, these findings suggest value in broadening applications of Lorimer’s (2007) concept of nonhuman charisma to incorporate dimensions of *sonic* charisma. Such efforts would explicitly move beyond the visible – and visual aesthetics – to explore qualities of *audible* exchanges, such as birdcalls and songs, which might be comical, intense, subtle, constant or episodic. As demonstrated in the quotes above, sonic charisma unfolds as a relational quality created as participants respond to quirky bird calls and songs through playful storytelling and creative anthropomorphism, sparking curiosity and offering shared sensory reference points.

While participant stories were primarily crafted around compelling sonorous events, these were often intertwined with the broader senses, demonstrating how ‘sound spills across into other sensory registers’ (Gallagher et al., 2017, p. 630) in shaping experience. For example, one participant, Eric, a keen gardener in his 70s, pointed out a series of nest boxes that he and his wife had put out amidst their climbing roses for the resident birdlife:

*With the roses, again they’re fragrant, which I sort of think – there’s a nest box up there, and I often think the scent coincides with when there are fledglings in there, and you get all the scent coming out. And so they must be sitting inside this nest box, thinking “What a wonderful world! Coming, bringing us food. And can you smell it out there? Isn’t it wonderful?” ((laughs)) (Eric, male, 70s, acquired progressive condition, partial sight).*

Rather than focusing on negative aspects of sight impairment (non-normative negativisms), the participants’ playful dispositions towards these nonhuman sounds, scents and socialities reflects ‘an openness to the world in the moment’ (Woodyer, 2012, p.320), with many appreciating such sonorous encounters as ‘playful events’ that entangle human and nonhuman life in joyful and pleasurable ways (Lobo, 2016). These narratives counter the received ‘incompatibility’ of happiness and disability (Bolt, 2019), and support more affirmative models of disability that emphasise the importance of being ‘open to the possibility of positive discourse’ within disability studies (Bolt, 2015, p. 1114).

For many participants, encounters with birdlife also generated moments of awe and wonder. For example, one participant, Arthur, a retired botanist, described the wonder of listening to a dawn chorus, describing how the bird sounds reverberate around his local woodland area in spring:

*When you hear the birdsong, especially in March/April, and they’re singing in the woodland, it’s a wonderful feeling because – I don’t know why, but – the wood echoes and it’s like being in a cathedral. You hear the birds singing and all this echoing, it’s a most amazing sound ... it’s the most beautiful sound (Arthur, male, 70s, acquired progressive condition, minimal sight).*

Sensations of awe and wonder are more commonly attributed to visual dimensions of encounter, for example in the context of wildlife tourism (Curtin, 2009), but these findings reflect important sonic dimensions that are often obscured by such ocular-

centric preoccupations (Folmer, Haartsen, & Huigen, 2019). Reflecting a shift from non-normative negativisms to non-normative positivisms with sight impairment (Bolt, 2019), one participant, Trish, highlighted the benefits of taking the time to engage with birdlife in more-than-visual ways, rediscovering the value of a conscious multisensory connection with – and respect for – nature rather than relying on visual shortcuts:

*I think people, they tend to use their eyes so much. And I'll say, "Oh did you hear that?" And nobody's heard it because they're looking. It's that visual stimulation (Trish, female, 60s, acquired progressive condition, light perception).*

Notably, moments of sonic awe were at times enhanced through rare tactile qualities of birdlife encounter, with participants expressing a deep sense of respect that something so small and so fragile can produce such beautiful sounds. Demonstrating how both sound and touch have 'the power to engage us directly and emotionally, encouraging deep and personal experiences of shared feeling' (Revill, 2016, p. 249), one participant, Annie, recalled:

*There was a time when I was at boarding school that somebody had found an injured bird. And I can remember this bird was placed in a box with a blanket. And it was just on our path up to our house at school. And I remember having a look, and stroking it, and picking it up, and holding it close to me. And I could feel its heartbeat. And how fragile it was and how beautiful, and how soft. And subsequently it died, and I was absolutely heartbroken . . . And I suppose that made me so much more aware of the fragility of life, the fragility of those tiny creatures, how beautiful they are. It gave me the opportunity to feel one and – when you can't see very well, so much of your seeing is done through your hands . . . so that experience of actually holding that little bird enhanced that sense of "wow", and just how beautiful they are (Annie, female, 60s, congenital eye condition, partial sight).*

In this quote, Annie touches on the phenomenon of 'seeing' with the hands, something that is rarely possible with birdlife. Notably, this language reflects a common tendency to legitimate alternative forms of sensory perception through the use of visual language, often alluding to sensory compensation rather than embracing non-normative positivisms that 'value the senses in and on their own terms' (Bolt, 2019, p. 98). More in line with affirmative models of disability, however, Annie's narrative also foregrounds vulnerability as a shared condition of being alive, as an 'ordinary rather than extraordinary characteristic of human experience' (Cameron, 2014, p. 28). In particular, Annie demonstrates aspects of what Frank (2013, p. 49) identifies as the 'communicative body', a body that 'accepts its contingency as part of the fundamental contingency of life'. This transformative moment with the injured bird – a moment characterised by wonder, respect and the 'shared condition of being bodies' (Frank, 2013, p. 35) – tapped into deeper feelings of grief that Annie was grappling with as a child, having lost her mother to cancer before the move to boarding school. Although unable to articulate it at the time, Annie explained the parallels she had felt between the body of the injured bird and that of her mother. As noted by Frank (2013, p. 49), 'the human body, for all its resilience, is fragile; breakdown is built into it', as it is for all the nonhuman beings with whom we live and co-mingle. Awareness of this fragility prompted a strong sense of care for nonhuman others amongst many participants, an important form of corporeal charisma. As Quinn explained, '*nature, it's ((pause)) something that, to me, at times, needs a bit of help*'. This concern translated into varied efforts to protect and look after nonhuman others, particularly local birdlife, be it through providing food and shelter in and around the home, hand-rearing injured birds, or participating in

environmental conservation activities, although participants also lamented the lack of inclusive opportunities for the latter.

### ***Birdy socialities: implications for practice***

The findings presented here emphasise the value of fostering and tuning into these nonhuman sonorous socialities, particularly with birdlife, in the context of sight impairment. In doing so, participants nurtured a sense of connection with – and curiosity in – the ‘more-than-human relational networks that we are all part of’ (Wilkie, 2015, p. 331). These encounters can be ‘enticed’, whereby feeding or other strategies are proactively used to encourage the presence of birdlife, or they may occur more unexpectedly within ‘encounters of being’ (Keul, 2013). Whilst study participants gave examples of both, the former were particularly valuable given the challenges in spotting more fleeting visual presences. Several participants had set up bird feeders in their yards, gardens and window ledges, allowing them to maximise use of residual vision, alongside audible birdcalls and songs, to track the nonhuman socialities unfolding at the feeders. One participant, Eric, emphasised the importance of careful planting to nurture the survival of local birdlife throughout the year:

*We plant things that have red berries, orange and yellow. And the birds sit on the red and eat them. But the others, they're waiting for them to change. So as the winter goes on and they have a greater need for food, then they'll eat those. If you only have the red ones, they all disappear early on, and you haven't got the ones later ... And, you see, you can hear the amount of birds that are around and about now [in December] (Eric, male, 70s, acquired progressive condition, partial sight).*

Through these strategies, participants were not only trying to care for the birds, but also building longer-term relationships with repeat visitors. For example, one participant, Glen, had set up three feeding stations in and around his workshop, surrounded by woodlands. He described the resident birdlife as his ‘*extended local family*’, providing a sense of supportive sociality in the absence of human others:

*The little robins welcome me in the morning, and then the blackbird follows me in. It's just one of those things. You get into a funny little routine. It makes me happy (Glen, male, 50s, early stages of acquired progressive sight impairment).*

While participants spoke highly of these regular, familiar encounters with birdlife, many were also keen to make sense of the unfamiliar, be it more transient avian visitors or birdlife living further afield. For some, this involved the use of bird identification mobile applications, such as ‘ChirpOMatic’ or ‘Warblr’, although there was a sense that current applications are rarely sensitive enough to the range of bird calls and songs that often co-occur in a setting at any one time. Other participants used a combination of led walks and bird song soundtracks to try to learn the distinctive sounds of different species for identification purposes, highlighting the role of sound in shaping encounters of ecological charisma. For example, one participant, Eve commented:

*Birdsong is one of the best aspects of nature for me ... We do a dawn chorus walk, my husband and I ... it's about a four or five mile walk in the company of a small group, with one of the*

*park rangers who knows his birds. And that's fantastic because, I'm hopeless at remembering what it is I'm listening to ((laughs)) ... I like to think, 'Oh, I might not be able to see it, but if I can just learn the wretched songs, I might be able to tell you what it is' ((laughs))... But going out with him is brilliant ... Even if you can't get out into it, you can bring the sounds to you. I listen to birdsong quite a lot, soundtracks that are quite readily available, so you can immerse yourself in the sound of it, if not in the actuality (Eve, female, 60s, congenital eye condition and acquired progressive condition, partial sight).*

Recognising the importance of creating space for such processes of familiarisation and sociality, our collaborative 'Nature Narratives' work identified a range of approaches for working with people with sight impairment to develop new ways of sensing and make sense of more fleeting, unexpected nonhuman nature encounters in diverse conservation settings. Creative approaches to audio description and live interpretation played an important role in this, particularly amongst activity coordinators and visitor experience staff who typically support environmental education and awareness initiatives.

Traditional approaches to audio description – a practice that has developed since the 1980s – tend to focus on describing the *visual* elements of a scene or object, taking care to orient people within the setting first, before honing in on descriptions of key visual features of interest. Codified rules and guidelines insist on 'objective neutrality' in the writing and delivery of audio description, which is based on the somewhat flawed assumption that 'absolute objectivity is possible or even desirable' (Kleege, 2018, p. 101). The findings presented in this paper highlight the importance of engaging with more affective dimensions of nonhuman charisma within these descriptions, invoking the non-visual senses in the language used, and drawing attention to particular scents, sounds, textures or quirks of movement. The use of humour and, where appropriate, creative anthropomorphism, can be valuable in translating compelling sonorous or textural qualities of birdy encounter into memorable shared points of reference, sparking the imagination and encouraging people to engage with the stories of individual birds, bird species and habitats. Where the presence of particularly sonorous species cannot be guaranteed, describers could take opportunities to recreate their distinctive sounds in other ways, for example verbally, using mobile applications, or more simply, by tapping or rubbing two stones or other materials together to an appropriate rhythm or cadence, offering acoustic points of reference to listen out for in the future. The fleeting nature of many birdlife encounters invites more agile (rather than pre-scripted) approaches to audio description; birds are often on the move and it is important to be responsive to this and open to the moment.

At the same time, our findings also suggest value in offering sensitive – and at times sparing – description *in situ*, allowing people to tune into the birdy socialities unfolding for themselves, before explaining the source of the sounds or sensations if necessary as they evolve. Through integrating 'super sense' activities in each of our Nature Narratives workshops, we encouraged trainees to close their eyes and shift their locus of attention; moving gradually from sensations in the immediate vicinity, reflecting on how different features of the environment – living and otherwise – were shaping the sounds, scents and microclimates unfolding around them, before shifting awareness out to different zones of their site and beyond, and finally zoning back in again. In doing so, participants began to recognise changes in how they could convey the multisensory stories of the habitats, ecosystems and birdy socialities that characterise their sites, not specifically for

the benefit of people with sight impairment but to enrich *mainstream* visitor experiences. As noted by one participant, '*the sensory immersion was very profound personally, and made me think of its application to members of the public*'. In this way, workshop participants began to move away from the idea of producing segregated 'pre-packaged' experiences for visitors with sight impairment (rooted in overly narrow, normative or stereotypical ideas of embodied ability and capacity); instead recognising (affirming) the knowledge such visitors can contribute to site interpretation practices by highlighting other categories of aesthetic value (Kleege, 2018) and thereby potentially enlarging and enriching everyone's experiences of nature.

## Concluding remarks

This paper has drawn on the birdlife experiences of people with varying forms of sight impairment in England, to address recent calls for more affirmative approaches to disability within and beyond social and cultural geography (Cameron, 2014; Marquès-Brocksopp, 2011); approaches that appreciate disability 'as part of the enrichment of cultural, social and personal experience' (Bolt, 2019, p. 7). Recognising the risk of social isolation amongst people with sight impairment (RNIB, 2015), the paper foregrounds the importance of *nonhuman* social interactions in fostering feelings of positive connection, pleasure and meaning, with a particular focus on human-bird socialities. Building on Lorimer's (2007) concept of nonhuman charisma, the paper introduces the notion of 'sonic charisma', and demonstrates how this relational quality of encounter is created as people engage with distinctive bird calls and songs that inspire playful storytelling and creative anthropomorphism, sparking curiosity and offering shared sensory reference points. For many participants, such birdy socialities contributed to uplifting experiences of situated connectivity, characterised by playful moments of companionship, experiences of awe and respect, and a shared sense of existence in the world. Although three quarters of the participants in this study had some form of higher education qualification, this did not seem to distinguish who did and did not experience moments of sonic charisma and sociality in this way. Rather, it was the informal opportunities that participants had experienced to get to know such creatures directly, and the time invested to nurture this through their lives – for example, with family, friends and wildlife enthusiasts – that really enhanced such relational dynamics, interpretations and connections.

The findings invite a range of approaches for opening up more widespread opportunities to forge meaningful nonhuman relationships (with birdlife or otherwise) in the context of life with sight impairment; from actions that entice these nonhumans into everyday life, to shifts in the audio description and live interpretation practices of staff and volunteers based in culturally and ecologically-valued natural heritage sites. By foregrounding non-normative positivisms, recognising disability as 'a site for alternative values' (Bolt, 2015, p. 1107) and sensory knowledges, rather than an additional access 'need', a more inclusive visitor experience culture could be fostered. Such a culture would recognise people with sight impairment not as people to make changes *for*, but as people to make changes *with*; as individuals with their own valuable knowledges, interests and skills to bring to and enhance the work of nature conservation and



education organisations, who are often tasked with engaging people in the lives of creatures and species that are rarely seen or encountered.

This study has focused on socialities with birdlife experienced in the UK, with perhaps the riskiest encounters mentioned by participants involving adult swans protecting their cygnets. Future research could usefully explore how people with sight impairment negotiate varied nonhuman encounters (with birdlife and otherwise) within countries where humans coexist with more dangerous plants and animals, including venomous animals that are difficult to detect regardless of one's visual perception. The acoustic identification of different species in the tropics, for example, may be important not just for interest or pleasure, but for *safety* if people are going to avoid the risk of venomous bites or aggressive physical encounters. Such moments of encounter may be characterised more by self-protection than moments of playful or creative anthropomorphism. Similarly, people living in varied cultures may weave different stories and symbolism around the species they encounter, shaping alternative qualities of sonic charisma as people draw on diverse collective and personal points of reference to interpret such experiences in the contexts of their everyday and whole lives. Only by engaging with a plurality of experience will researchers continue to 'expand our understanding of human bodies in nonhuman nature' (Kafer, 2017, p. 221) and embrace 'the social world of humans and animals as they exist side-by-side' (Fletcher & Platt, 2018, p. 216), co-producing the everyday environments in which we all live, breathe and move.

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## Data Accessibility

Due to ethical concerns of maintaining participant confidentiality, the research data supporting this publication are not publically available.

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