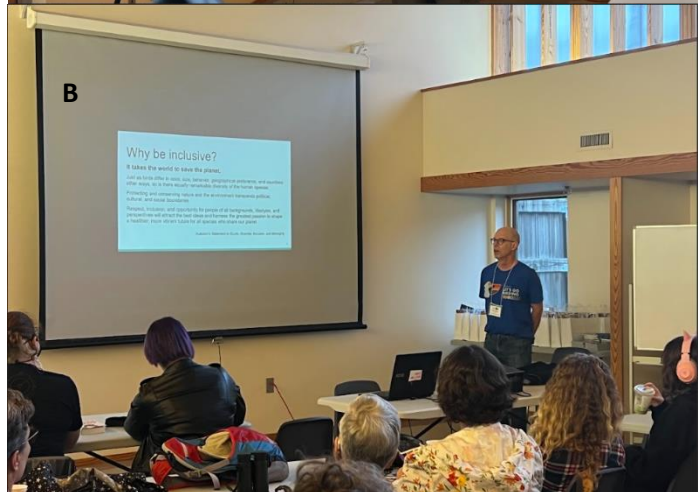


## Beginning Birders: A Program Providing Confidence and Community

The *Beginning Birder's Program* (BBP) was officially established in summer 2023 by two nonprofit organizations: Field Inclusive Inc. (FI) and Wake Audubon Society (WAS), both located in Raleigh/Wake County, N.C. Both organizations strive to offer more inclusive programming, and recognized that there was a need to cater to marginalized and historically excluded individuals who needed a space to feel safe while recreating in the outdoors. It has become evident that there is a lack of awareness that marginalized and historically excluded individuals and groups face additional barriers when either professionally working or recreating in the outdoors (Schell et al. 2020, Troutman et al. 2023). More specifically, “at-risk” individuals which include those minority identities of the following: race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity and/or religion are more likely to experience prejudice which may manifest against them (Demery and Pipkin 2021). Bird watching, or “Birding” as it is known to many, is a wonderful hobby to get people outdoors to explore and enjoy the natural world. With both FI and WAS having a niche for birds, it was effective for us to establish this program since we are experts in the space and knew that we could provide a great knowledge base for beginning birders. To compliment that, emphasizing that this space was safe, and making it inclusive, made our participant’s experiences much better.

Our BBP is being catered towards historically excluded and underrepresented groups, communities, and organizations of all ages. Our ambitious goal would be that success with such a program could lead to similar programs at other parks or nature centers. We are currently hosting the program with our park partner, Walnut Creek Wetland Center (WC); this park and nature center sits in an area within an underrepresented community. Our BBP is broken up into three parts, and provides an easy pace for beginning instructions and tips for first time birders. Part one introduces our participants to why we bird, bird



**Figure 1.** WAS Members Phil Doerr (A) discussing beginning skills to birding, and Rick LaRose (B) discussing why being inclusive matters. Both serve as instructors for the program.

characteristics to help identify birds, tools participants can use while they're birding such as apps and field guides, and how to use binoculars. Part two gets our participants outside for them to practice their skills with expert birders. We make sure that our bird walks are safe spaces, and offer useful and friendly guidance and tips to help our participants build up their confidence to bird. Part three gathers our participants back together as a group, and we conclude with a segment on safe birding, which involves ideas of how to be physically safe while in nature (i.e. identifying poison ivy, going out in pairs, having water and a snack) as well as how to be socially safe (i.e. how to best deescalate conflict if approached or questioned) and taking proactive measures (i.e. display something that identifies you as a birder to others; project confidence in place and purpose). These sessions allow our beginning birders to build up their confidence in the material and enjoy birding, all while knowing that they are in a safe and welcoming space to learn.

So far we have hosted two BBP sessions with two new partners: Outdoor Afro, an organization that celebrates and inspires Black leadership and connection in the outdoors, and the LGBT Center of Raleigh, an organization who celebrates and provides support to members of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or questioning) community. Both of these groups cater towards the mission of this program, and participant feedback has proven that we are headed in the right direction:

*“Very informative, understandable, and welcoming!”*

*“It feels so great to be among my people, and enjoying the outdoors in a safe space.”*

*“It was extremely helpful to have a queer - friendly space to explore nature. I struggle to find outdoor-oriented communities that are explicitly safe and supporting of LGBTQ and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) folks too, so this fulfilled a long desired need — thank you!”*



**Figure 2.** Participants from Outdoor Afro (A) and the LGBT Center of Raleigh (B) practice birding skills they learned in class such as bird ID.



Currently, our BBP runs off of any available funding from our parent organizations (WAS, FI, WC), as well as donations from individuals. Funding is used to purchase materials such as binoculars and field guides for participants to use during the sessions, and resources for participants to take home. We also purchase youth related items like workbooks that participants can take home for their young ones, as we want to get them excited about the outdoors and birding as well. We accept donations of new or gently used materials, as well as bird/nature friendly items that we use for participant giveaways after the program is complete. Volunteers from our parent organizations volunteer their time to help host and lead a session, which has a duration of 2 hours. Currently, our program is being offered twice every 6 months, and we plan to expand and offer another program: *Beyond Beginning Birding*, for participants to come back and learn more specific birding techniques beyond the beginning stage.



**Figure 3.** Field Inclusive Co-Founder Lauren D. Pharr poses for a “selfie” photo with participants from the LGBT Center at the conclusion of the program.

With an Outreach Grant from Animal Behavior Society (ABS), we will be able to continue more effective and inclusive programming by being able to offer and have readily available more materials for participants to use. Additionally, we have the vision to expand our program to serve the local Hispanic community, requiring the need for translated materials. We also want to provide and promote our program to persons who experience accessibility challenges. As we work to certify our local trails for accessibility in accordance with Birdability criteria (<https://www.birdability.org/>), our need here is to procure adaptive equipment like monoculars, scopes or other viewing devices which leave hands free to maneuver a wheelchair.

On behalf of FI and WAS, we are grateful for this grant and thank the grants committee and other members of ABS for recognizing that our program is changing confidence in individuals and groups whom we may rarely find outdoors, and providing them with a community – their community – to learn something new, and feel safe.