

LEE LI MING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Birdwatching in Singapore

Age-friendly leisure for
green cities¹

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Birdwatching for Active Ageing

Birdwatching, or birding for short, offers numerous benefits for healthy ageing. It engages both mind and body. Birders venture outdoors into green spaces, staying alert with eyes and ears attuned to the environment. Spotting an elusive bird calls for memory and recognition skills to identify the species. Moreover, getting started is simple—just a sense of curiosity and perhaps a pair of binoculars are all that is needed. As societies age, such low-cost and flexible activities are increasingly valued for their ability to promote health, maintain social connectedness, and encourage lifelong learning.

While people of all ages can enjoy birdwatching, it may be especially well-suited to older adults. Older adults often rise earlier in the day, giving them more

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

opportunities to enjoy the morning hours when bird activity is at its peak.

Building on this, the following note explores how Singapore—planned as a City in Nature—creates the conditions that make birdwatching more accessible and appealing, particularly for older adults, through urban design and community engagement.

City in Nature— Accessibility by Design

Keeping Nature Close

Physical accessibility is a key factor in whether older adults take up and sustain leisure activities. Nearby opportunities reduce the physical effort, travel costs, and time needed to participate. This makes leisure activities easier to integrate into daily routines.

Birdwatching is well-aligned with worldwide efforts for cities to bring nature closer to residents by incorporating green spaces. Singapore, as an island in the tropics, has naturally high bird diversity. It also happens to lie on bird migration routes, attracting some seasonal species. There is plenty to keep hobbyists excited without having to travel out of the city-state.

Despite high urban density, Singapore actively seeks to preserve natural capital and improve the accessibility of nature. As

Birdwatching in Singapore part of its City in Nature vision, it is targeted that by 2030, all households will be within a 10-minute walk from a green space. On top of allocating land for nature reserves, green spaces are integrated into neighbourhoods in the form of neighbourhood parks, green corridors, or even gardens within healthcare establishments. This allows even older adults with limited mobility access to sites for birdwatching as they age in place. There is a large variety of birds within residential neighborhoods, so much so that birdwatching from home—just by looking out of the window—is feasible. During COVID-19 pandemic, the National Parks Board (NParks) organised a “Stay Home” edition of its Garden Bird Watch citizen science programme.

More avid hobbyists could, of course, explore parks or nature reserves that are further away in search of more uncommon species. To complement the network of parks in Singapore, the NParks offers a digital resource listing recommended spots for birdwatching, highlighting the different species that could be spotted at various parks around Singapore. Park users could also navigate to and between parks using the NParks Explore a Route ([NEAR](#)) mobile application, which was launched in 2022 (Box 1). The application provides users with information on curated trails, park connectors, transport directions, and attractions along the way.

Age-friendly features

The key challenge after attracting citizens to parks is encouraging them to stay. In this regard, most parks in Singapore feature age-friendly designs, including well-paved trails, benches, ramps, shaded areas, and access to toilets. These elements reduce physical strain and create spaces for rest, which are important for older adults who may have mobility challenges or be more sensitive to heat. Singapore has many age-friendly birdwatching sites, one of which is Yishun Pond Park (Box 2).

Citizen Engagement— Ground-up and Top-down

In Singapore, there are a mix of ground-up (citizen-led) and top-down (government-led) community initiatives to engage birdwatchers. Beyond physical accessibility, having a community, whether formal or informal, is important for enticing older adults to join and sustain engagement in leisure activities. Community members can offer a sense of belonging, emotional support (e.g., encouragement to join activities, praise for accomplishments) as well as practical support (e.g., providing advice on where the best spots for birdwatching are or gear recommendations).

Box 1: Birding around Singapore

There are many spots for birdwatching in Singapore, ranging from manicured landscapes to more naturalistic nature reserves. Many of these sites are easily accessed by foot or public transport from residential areas.

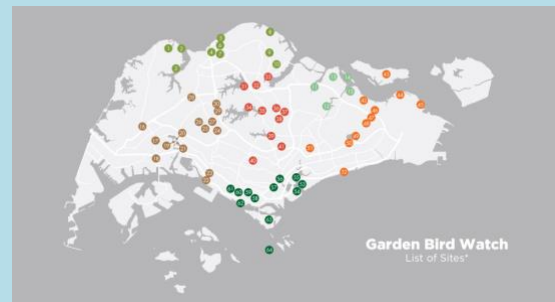


Figure 1: Map of 64 birdwatching sites involved in the National Parks Board's Garden Bird Watch, a citizen science initiative. (Image source: National Parks Board)

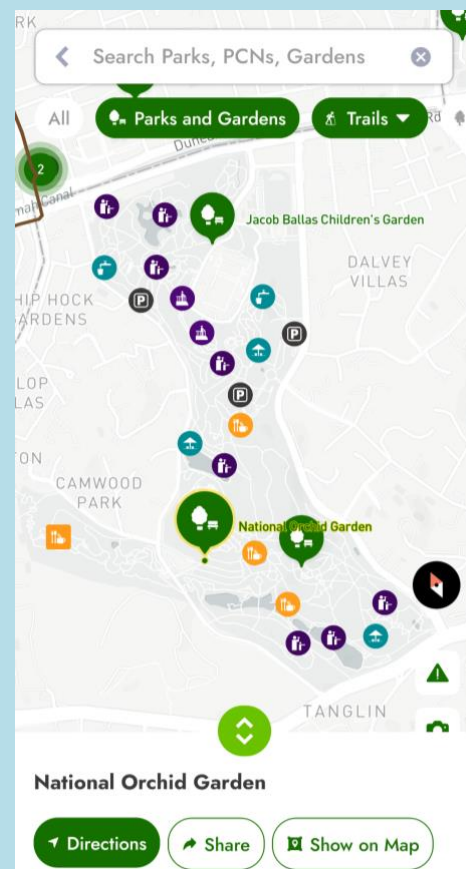


Figure 2: Screenshot from NEAR mobile application. Users can look up directions to parks and explore park features (e.g., attractions, paths, toilets and rest points) using the map. (Image source: NEAR application)

Ground-up

Box 2: Yishun Pond Park

Yishun Pond Park is one example of an accessible and age-friendly birdwatching location. It is located in Singapore's Yishun neighbourhood, amid public housing flats and a public hospital.



Figure 3: Yishun Pond Park and its surroundings. The pond is encircled by wheelchair-friendly pavements, and visitors have access to sheltered areas, toilets, and food stalls in the hospital. (Image source: Author)



Figure 4: Record of bird species spotted in Khoo Teck Puat Hospital next to the pond. The pond attracts a variety of birds, including waterfowl and herons. (Image source: Author, individual bird images on the board are credited to a group of contributors)

There are several community-led groups devoted to birdwatching, many of which attract members across age groups. Among the oldest and most established groups in Singapore is the Nature Society (Singapore) Bird Group, which was inaugurated in 1986.² The Group organises frequent birding sessions and educational talks that are open to members and the public.

With the rise of social media, there have since been more informal groups organised on online platforms. An example is the [Bird Sightings](#) group on Facebook. Members share photographs of their sightings on the page. Each post typically attracts at least a few responses, ranging from compliments about how beautiful the photograph was taken to questions about where an uncommon bird was spotted. There were several occasions in recent years where the sighting of a rare bird has attracted gatherings of enthusiastic birders.³ When rare birds appear, such as a Himalayan Griffon or Hair-Crested drongo, members of birding groups would send out alerts to other members via instant messaging groups or social media, alerting others to make their way over.

² Nature Society Singapore. (2024). *Bird Group*. <https://nss.org.sg/bird-group/>

³ Ang, A. (2025, February 6). Elusive vulture and drongo make landfall in S'pore, delighting birdwatchers. *The Straits Times*. [https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/elusive-](https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/elusive-vulture-and-drongo-make-landfall-in-spore-delighting-birdwatchers)

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Top-Down

Research suggests that beyond increasing a sense of social support, volunteering improves the quality of life of older adults by enhancing personal mastery—a sense that one is in control of their life circumstances.⁴ Besides ground-up initiatives, the government through the NParks organises capacity building for volunteers.

The Garden Bird Watch⁵, started in 2015 by NParks under the Community in Nature initiative, is a bi-annual event. During each round of bird watch, citizens are trained in basic survey and birdwatching techniques to keep track of bird populations over time, aiding in the conservation of garden birds. This provides citizens with the chance to develop skills in birdwatching and contribute to a worthy cause at the same time. Between 2015 and 2019, about 20% of Garden Bird Watch volunteers were aged 50 and above,⁶ showing that older adults are already active contributors to citizen science in Singapore's parks. NParks is looking to further increase participation among multi-generational families that include both the young and old.

⁴ Ang, S., & Malhotra, R. (2024). How helping you helps me: A longitudinal analysis of volunteering and pathways to quality of life among older adults in Singapore. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 79(5), gbae013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbae013>

Conclusion

Birdwatching is a wholesome form of leisure that promotes physical and mental stimulation while offering opportunities for older adults to socialise and contribute to society. In Singapore, it is supported not only through the greening of the city and age-friendly park design but also through community initiatives that encourage participation.

Birding in Singapore is no longer confined to niche nature groups and has gained popularity among the general population. With that said, older adults may still face barriers to participation. Some older adults may hesitate to take up new activities due to shyness, lack of confidence, or limited digital access. Without targeted outreach, they may not hear about birding walks or community events, even if they would enjoy them. This speaks to the importance of strengthening community infrastructure to lower these social and psychological hurdles.

Partnerships with community clubs, Residents' Committees, and Active Ageing Centres could potentially bring birdwatching opportunities closer to

⁵ Low, B. W., Wong, J. S. Y., Goh, L., & Er, K. (2020). *A review of Garden bird watch, 2015-2019*. National Parks Board. https://www.nparks.gov.sg/-/media/nparks-real-content/about-us/publications/garden_bird_watch_lowres.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

home through neighbourhood-level walks, introductory talks, and small group activities. These efforts would complement existing digital platforms and make the activity more inclusive. In this way, birdwatching can be promoted not only as a hobby but as a pathway to successful ageing that complements the City in Nature vision.

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