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It's just after 5am on a bank holiday morning in May. I've come to Epping Forest to listen to the dawn chorus. Did you hear that? According to my bird identification app, somewhere in the background we've got a blackbird, a song thrush, a pigeon. I think there's also a wren, a robin. And wait for it.

That's the sound of a muntjac. Muntjac are small deer, about the size of a medium dog. They're often known as barking deer, and you can hear why.

I'm perched on a log and the smell of the nearby stream hits my nostrils. The overnight chill is clearing. I've woken up at a frankly horrendous hour to get here in time to listen to the morning symphony. But despite being tired, I feel soothed and relaxed. It's a real privilege to be here.

Research suggests that birdsong can be calming for our nervous system, reducing feelings of anxiety. The sensory experience of being in nature is something that everyone could benefit from. Everyone should be able to access it. But is that always the case?

In this episode, I'll chat with others about what the word accessible means. Because when you stop to think about it, there are so many layers to this term. I'll join a sensory walk along an easy access route in High Beach. I'll follow a waymarked trail from Loughton Tube Station into the woods. And I'll think about neurodiverse experiences in nature, including my own experiences.

I'm Talia Randall, and you're listening to Voices of Epping Forest. Episode 2: Birdsong and chips

Right so, everybody come back out again

It's a sunny Friday morning and I'm with the Epping Forest Sunflower Group. Despite the helicopters flying overhead, it's a gorgeous day and the moods are high. The Sunflower Group runs social activities, art projects and nature walks for disabled people, their friends and families.

A recent survey from Country Living found that 70% of people with physical disabilities struggle to access green spaces in England. So today, I'm joining the Sunflower Group to find out how they are widening access to nature.

We're doing a sensory walk around the easy access route today at High Beach in Epping Forest.

That's John, He's a photographer and a nature expert who will be guiding us today.

And today we've got with us Talia. *Hi!* Who's gonna do a little bit of recording and talk to you about how you feel about things, about the walks and whatever else you want to choose. And we've got of course the Sunflower Group.

**Y**eah!

I'm not gonna mention everybody's names. Because you're all trouble. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Especially Peter.

With an intro like that, I obviously want to chat with Peter immediately. He's one of the members of the Sunflower Group.

I love a walk in the fresh air. In the forest. I love the forest.

Yeah, me too. Especially this time of year, because it's spring. All the flowers are coming out.

Yeah, everything. Everything's coming out.

Oo, we’re getting in people’s way I’m walking too slowly.

Okay, okay, I don't mind.

what are you most looking forward to about today

Anything, anything, anything new, new, new comes, comes out. Anything new.

Yeah, I'm, I'm similar to you. I'm really interested in learning more about what we see.

Tree, tree, tree, trees. I don't know, I don't know about tree, trees, uh, trees, about, about anything. A chance to like to learn a bit more, a bit more about trees.

Absolutely. Yeah. And we've got a pond here. We've got a pond,

a pond, ducks, ducks, baby, baby ducks.

Oh, they’re so sweet. Yeah, I can see them just on the little, like, green on the green.

**Y**eah.

Do you like animals?

Yeah, I love, I love animals.

Do you have a favourite animal?

I love fish.

Fish? Just all fish? All fish.

I like, I like, I like, I got, I got, I got a big pond at home.

Both Peter and I wanted to learn more about the trees. And John made sure that we did.

Who knows what species this tree is?

Is it an oak? Oak tree, yeah. It's a veteran oak. Oh wow.

We did a very rough measurement of a tree trunk by wrapping our arms around it. I mean, who doesn't love a bit of tree hugging

We're reckoning this tree is 280 years old. Some of the trees here are a thousand years old.

We were told why holly leaves are spiky.

Deer enjoy chewing the holly leaves, but they don't enjoy the prickly spines. So the holly tree develops these spines to stop animals and predators eating them.

Then we stood in front of a tree for ages, debating whether this gnarly, bumpy shape on the bark looked like an owl or a frog.

and this is a little frog isnt it. Its got two little eyes. Oh what an owl? What do you reckon, it can be an owl if you want.

if it's a frog then someone could kiss it and it could turn into a prince maybe.

I’m not gonna kiss it, peter, come and kiss the frog!

I think it looks like a frog, but I'm going to let the debate carry on without me because I want to think about the prep needed for a trip like this one. The country living research about nature access that I mentioned earlier revealed that 93% of respondents made extensive preparations before going on a walk.

These preparations might be looking up the route in advance, checking for things like kissing gates or stiles, in case that could block the way. It might be trying to figure out what the terrain is. How do you even get there, especially with limited funds in a cost of living crisis? There's also the fear that despite research, when you do arrive, things might be different to what you expected.

I want to explore this in more detail with Mirka, who works as a community connector.

In your opinion, what are some of the barriers that groups like this face in terms of Getting outdoors, accessing nature, what do you see in your work?

Transport is one key thing because if you haven't got somebody to bring you up here, there isn't a bus that comes up here. So that's the first barrier if you haven't got accessibility of transport.

There are different, um, transport, um, services, but they're not always available to everybody. It depends on if you get PIP, different, um, funds to fund money for taxis. Um, also if a client has got a PA, sometimes they're responsible for bringing them to the, to the, session. But really, again, looking at accessibility, like, for example, this pathway is lovely and flat. It's nice and dry. Everybody can come. Wheelchair access. Sometimes you don't have that. Yeah. I mean, if you go to different parts of the forest, it wouldn't be accessible. It would be too high, too low. It would, wouldn't be. But I think more than anything, it's just giving people the information that things are going on.

So that's why as a Community Connector for West Essex, I go to actual groups and speak to them and find out what are the gaps, how can we get find your active funding, perhaps to bring an activity to them that they wouldn't be able to go to. And therefore in a forest like this, we make sure that so many people that come in and supporting each of the clients.

Sorry I just inhaled a bug there. Yeah. Yeah. I'm just really going for it. And even if there are those accessible pathways, how do you actually get there? Exactly. And like making sure, cause it can, it can take quite a lot of time and effort researching, finding out the information because these accessible pathways do exist, but it's just the, getting that information out. Yeah, it's all the before bit actually rather than being in the actual forest.

Yeah, and I think this is where groups such as Sunflower Group, they do all the research. So this is nice and free. But if you take into account that perhaps you have to pay a taxi to come up here. Yeah, that's quite difficult.

Yeah, and it's quite a sort of, it's a bit out of the way, so a taxi might be quite expensive. Exactly. Like, you can't just get an Uber because it's not, you're not in central London. What are some of the benefits that you think about, these kinds of activities?

Oh, phenomenal for your mental health. Um, again, all of these sessions we do, um, litter picking, bark rubbing. We've got a caff there. We've got all the, you know, refreshments. So there's always like that final stage where you, yeah, where you're going to have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee.

Ooh we're being called in for another oh i like it

That's John calling us back to the group because we’ve come to the end of the trail. But before I leave I want to ask Peter if the day matched up to his expectations

Peter? How are you enjoying the day?

lovely, It's lovely, lovely. I didn't know, know, know about trees before. I didn't know. I know, I know a lot about trees. Hugging, hugging a tree.

We did, there were about five people hugging a tree to measure it

Five people hugging a tree.

And what about the thing, what about the little faces we saw in the tree? What Do you reckon it was? So you think it was an owl, not a frog?,

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, an owl.

Alright, that's good to know. Maybe we'll have to put it to a public vote.

Yeah, public vote.

It's time to head over to a different part of Epping Forest. Next stop Loughton Station.

It's a surprisingly cold Wednesday afternoon in April. I'm about to meet Fran Turauskis, who is a bit of a legend in the outdoors world. Fran is passionate about nature. She runs podcasts, festivals and she's been on some pretty epic adventures, like hiking the El Camino de Santiago in Spain.

But the thing that links all of her work is accessibility. I was recently drawn to an article she wrote about adventuring with epilepsy, sharing tips and insights in order to break down the stigma that can come with the diagnosis. Fran is really motivated by the fact that everyone should have access to the outdoors, so I've asked her to join me for a hike and a chat.

Hi, how are you doing? You're ready, you're ready.

Fran and I, we don't drive, so we meet outside Loughton Station, an underground stop at the end of the Central Line. There's a simple waymarked trail from here that takes you straight into Epping Forest.

The trail starts at the station. On the Welcome to Loughton sign, I can see a small green circle with an arrow pointing the way.

What I like about this one is that it says, to the forest.

There are more arrows along the way and Fran is really good at spotting them.

I've clocked it. I've clocked it. It's there, yeah. Like, if in doubt, just keep walking forward.

: But then

I will say

there is a junction, Okay, so this is where a tiny bit of common sense, so if we were to go straight, there aren't really any trees. But if we're going to go on this little left..

In 10 minutes, we've made it into the woods from the station. As well as hearing Fran's first impression of this place, I want to get her take on what access can mean.

Have you been to Epping Forest before?

No, I've never been.

We're only like just in it, but what are your first impressions?

It just feels like it's a really old place. It doesn't feel like it's a manicured place. What I love about these kind of old, ancient woodlands, you can tell straight away because I'm looking at the, um, kind of like root system of the tree in front of me and it's just so gnarly and I love places like that where you can just, um, feel the history in it.

We're not far from the, from Loughton Camp, which is kind of Dick Turpin land. So there's just like, a human history I just find that really fascinating, like, what have these trees seen?

Yeah, and what's interesting about that, it makes me think about how, uh, obviously Dick Turpin and Highwaymen and that kind of thing, that it, places like this and the forest and the woodland used to be that no go place. It was the scary, there are wolves, there are robbers in there, whereas now we come to relax and, you know, we, we feel much more at home out here.

Yeah, they're about like pleasure and rejuvenation. Um, and when it comes to that nurturing environment that a forest or that nature can offer, Obviously lots of people will access nature in different ways. You're really passionate about increasing access to the outdoors.

Can you tell me a little bit about your kind of motivation for making nature space more equitable to more people?

So for me personally, one of the things is, um, being able to actually get there.

Number one.

And also a little bit of what we count as the outdoors in quotes and nature in quotes. The good thing with something like this is that I can still get there. But there are so many places which I just can't get to without asking for lifts or having enough money to get in a taxi to get there being able to access the, the bigger spaces of nature, the, um, areas where it is a little bit more maintained as nature. National parks and national trails and this kind of thing. Without having public transport there, I either end up having to be very time rich.

Yeah.

And I will walk there.

Yeah, you do quite, you do quite a lot of walking. It's like you do do quite a lot of walking. You do a hike before you get to the hike.

Yeah. Uh, Or I need to be money rich and get a taxi there.

we walked from the tube station, which was waymarked. So actually there are some places, even in kind of big epic nature spaces that are accessible by walking by public transport, but you just have to find where they are.

Yeah.

Those three things that Fran mentioned, being time rich, money rich, or socially rich, are part of this idea, I think, access needs can mean different things for different people. For some, it's a physical access requirement, like a paved pathway. For others, it's making sure there's a toilet nearby. In the last episode, I spoke about safety and the feeling that many women have when walking alone.

I think that all of these issues are interconnected. We're all interconnected. But lots of people might think of the word access as something outside of themselves.

There's so many other things around that that people don't necessarily necessarily take into account unless it affects them, so things like periods.

Exactly.

And having to deal with your periods when you're out, particularly if you're on a day hike. Yeah. And uh, to go into it as a little bit of a tip from my point of view. When I went on the Camino, which is a nice through hike in Spain. I did a lot of research about how to handle that.

I bet.

And I didn't want to be carrying, like, loads of pads and loads of, um, tampons and this kind of thing because I had a very small backpack and I needed that space. And I ended up going with a menstrual cup. And I've never looked back because

Do you know, so many people think these menstrual cups are like converts. they're just like, people get evangelical about it, which I respect. Those kinds of tips are so important because some people might get embarrassed or feel like they’re taboo but they shouldnt be because our bodies and how they are and how they exist and interact with the world are an essential part, like we need them to be able to hike or stroll or wheel through a place. So getting to know yourself and not being shy about asking those questions or sharing those tips is really important.

Are there any other kind of tips or things that you wish you would have known when you were kind of at the beginning of your walking or hiking journey that you're like Fran in the past. Write this down.

Um, I think it would be just to ask people to go along with you a little bit more. Mm. Or ask if you can go along with other people.

hmm.

It comes back to that thing again of that, like, having that social circle of, I really like doing solo hikes because I can go at my own pace. I can, you know, have the time to myself to just relax and, you know, That kind of thing

you can break whenever you want to break

Whenever I want to break, I can like, you know, take a picture of a flower for however long I want to. But then there is also the aspect of if it is something which I am less familiar with having somebody that knows a bit more. Can be really good. Yeah And that can also be like hiring guides as well Again, it does come a little bit back to that money thing of being able to hire someone but if you don't have um uh kind of like the social know how or the local know how.

Hiring local guides I think can be a really good way of doing it. It's not something that I do myself for walks but it is something I do quite a lot in terms of doing work and doing kind of, um, things like this where you know, I get you to show me around and that kind of thing.

Let me take you, deep into the hayfever land. Let me guide you hear. I totally hear what you're saying about the, the group stuff, the guide stuff, like even just in the process of doing this podcast, I've learned so much more about the groups that have. very often free community walks here. You get given a meeting point and an end point and then you just kind of follow along the people who know what they're doing and it's like, great.

And I think definitely as an introduction that can feel really secure, especially a lot of groups might be organised around a shared, identity or experience that especially if that might be something that might hold feel like it holds you back from accessing nature - your gender your sexuality whatever - then that can be really quite powerful um yeah just saw a beautiful little bird I was like what is that

yeah I saw a little flash of black wings of some sort. In terms of group hikes And group activities and organised activities in general. One of the things I get a little bit annoyed with having to navigate is telling activity leaders about my epilepsy. And it's one of the reasons that I actually quite like doing things solo. It can be a real conversation with people when I have to tick a box that says, Yes, I have epilepsy. And it's actually one of the conditions which quite often is mentioned by name on disclaimer forms. And it just opens up a whole conversation which in some ways is good, but depending on the organisation and the provider, there can be a lot of panic from them when that box is ticked. I have had organisers actually say to me that they wouldn't be happy for me to take part without having a buddy.

Oh no.

The word that they used.

Oh god, it's really demoralising isn't it?

Yeah and even with the organisers that are kind of like very good, it really does fall into two categories. It's either people that panic and kind of like essentially make it clear that they would rather I wasn't there. And then the ones that are super good and just like, oh okay great, thanks for letting me know. Is there anything we need to know in particular?

And I just don't know if it's someone new, which way it's gonna go. So that's, that's one of the things where it does, it does come back to that. Yes, I'd say to myself, like, ask for, ask for help. You can do things in groups. It can be really fun doing that, but at the same time, would I do anything differently?

Possibly not, because it, it becomes really tiring having to explain every single time. Yes, I have an epilepsy diagnosis, but actually I haven't had a seizure in seven years now. So I have to tick that because I do have a diagnosis and I take medication and I need to make sure that I take my medication.

But in terms of it affecting my activities, it doesn't. Going through that conversation with people constantly, it just gets really tiring. I think people and organisers and hike leaders and all this kind of thing, they're, they're getting much better at doing it for a lot of different conditions and a lot of different access needs.

But I do feel like epilepsy is a very odd condition with that in that there is so much stigma around it that the actual access needs are very low for me but the stigma is what holds me back more than anything.

It's really eye opening hearing you say that and I appreciate you explaining that and I'm sorry that these are experiences that have happened to you. What advice would you give to someone organising an activity? What could they do differently?

I think one thing would be if you have a disclaimer form where you specifically mention conditions or, in my instance, epilepsy, have a follow up question straight away rather than leaving it until when I arrive. Have a drop down box where it's like, do you have epilepsy? Yes. Is there anything you feel we need to know? Yes or no.

Great. So simple.

You know, a follow up question within that form, within that disclaimer, um, just saves the person with the epilepsy, the onus being on them to open that conversation every time. Because I'm going to be honest with you. I know people that don't. Yeah, they go in and they don't disclaim. Yeah, because it's easier.

Yeah. So I guess that feeling of safety goes beyond ticking a box. It's about that kind of emotional safety as well, which, um, for someone listening might sound a bit like, whoa, there we’re just talking about a walk, but that's exactly it.

Because for many people, it's not just a walk and it's not necessarily a condition or whatever that is the barrier. It's people's attitudes towards that condition. Yeah. As well as the kind of physical access that is the thing that, yeah, can keep people excluded.

Yeah, totally agree.

This is a really annoying and difficult question. If there was like one thing that you could change in the world. Yeah. That would, in your opinion, help more people get out into spaces like Epping Forest. What would it be?

Well priced and reliable public transport. That's it.

Boom. I'll vote for that.

That would be my number one thing. It is so intersectional in terms of who needs that well priced and reliable public transport.

I think it's interesting that transport has come up again. That's clearly a big access theme. I also really appreciate what Fran was saying about stigma and how other people's attitudes are often the barrier.

When I think about myself and what access means to me in the outdoors, theres lots to draw from, but as someone who is neurodivergent, maps are a right pain.

I have a famously bad sense of direction. Figuring out where I am in the forest is a nightmare. Things like planning can be difficult too. And timing. How long is a hike going to take? Now to some people, I know that might sound ridiculous. But to any fellow ADHD pals out there, I think you know what I mean.

Seemingly simple tasks can take me a significant amount of time. And I'm not saying this is a huge issue and there are ways around it. I'm just saying that a hike can take me a few more layers of preparation than a neurotypical person. But walking in the woods can be a really brilliant way to calm my ADHD mind which sometimes moves a million miles an hour.

The way my brain works can cause me quite a lot of stress sometimes and being in the trees really soothes me. I wanted to chat a bit more about this with another neurodivergent nature lover.

can you tell us your name?

Yes, I'm Emma.

nice to meet you Emma

I hung out with Emma on a walk organised by Epping Forest Pride. You met this group in the last episode.

Emma and I talked about a few things. How important this place is to the two of us. Our experiences of being neurodivergent in nature. And Emma also told me a really cute romance story.

Why is nature so important to you?

So I think the thing that comes to mind is during the pandemic. There's a dog coming to see us. Wants to be in the interview. Um, during the pandemic I was Really ill and very isolated and I got really depressed. I'd moved to a new country I didn't know anybody at all and I was just alone every day. And I decided that I needed to move back to the UK, um, to be sort of closer to home, but I didn't know anybody here either.

Um, and as part of my recovery, I just had a couple of months before I started my new job where I just walked in the forest every day. Um, and like, because I'm autistic as well when I'm very stressed and I get sensory overwhelm really easily. And it's so nice to be in the forest because it's really quiet and there's not like lots of bright reflections.

Like if I was walking in the city, Because walking's really calming, and like, it's good to give my body a rhythm. But if I was walking in the city, then everything was like, bright reflections and like, loud noises. And it was so good to be in the forest, and just like, It feels calm.

It's so important, and I think that sensory experience is vital. Like, I have ADHD, which obviously is different, but like, I, It resonates what you're saying about the sensory, Mm

Hmm.

over stimulation. Noise is a big trigger for me, so just to be able to kind of have a little bit of quiet time. I actually, it took me quite a long time to realise how important that is to me.

Yeah.

You also have another really nice nature story. Didn't you and your girlfriend meet in like a similar walk?

Yeah, so actually we like, First connected on Tinder and then we were like, okay, we don't know if this is going to be a romantic connection or a platonic connection, but like, let's meet and start hanging out and see what happens.

Um, and we met going for walks in Epping forest. So like we were in Mount Pleasant kind of area and it's like really beautiful. And there's a little kiosk where you can get chips and veggie burger, which is great. And then at some point in June, we were like, um, I feel like this is maybe romantic. Do you want to like have an actual date? Um, and now it really feels like It's part of the mythology of our relationship that like, built around the forest.

Yeah. It's part of your story. And you've got to include chips in that story as well, you know. It's important! As the trees and the, uh, smells. Is there a message that you would like to share with someone who might be maybe in a similar position to how you were a little while ago? Maybe they were overwhelmed or finding it hard.

So actually I had a therapist, or I had a couple of therapists suggest to me that I should do mindfulness for like, the stress that I was feeling. And that was too overwhelming for me because if you're like, stress level is so, so, so high, and then you sit down to do like a meditation exercise, you can just be spinning your wheels inside your brain and it feels worse, not better.

I'm exactly that, I really don't like meditation. Yeah. we’re in the minority, but it really stresses me out.

Yeah. And then, so I was talking to a therapist about like, okay, actually meditation really doesn't work for my specific needs. Um, and she was like, you can do mindful walking. You can do the same thing by like, moving through a calm space.

Adapting recommendations for mental health things to, to your needs. And I would also say, like, accountability buddies are really useful for people who have autism or ADHD. So if you need somebody to like, go with you the first time, so you kind of find your bearings, so you know how to get there.

Um, do it. Ask a friend, like, do you want to walk in the forest with me? I feel like most of my friends I've met by asking them if they want to go for a walk in the forest. And I think, I think Epping forest is great because there's so many tube stations and bus stops that are right at the edge. So like, if you go to Buckhurst or Loughton, you can be in the forest in like less than 10 minutes.

Or Chingford, there's so many places that you can. Kind of enter from and I think I understand that there's a hurdle to doing it for the first time But once you do it, like you said you it might take you a while to realise that that's what you need But once you do it, you might be like, ah, okay. This is the key.

This is the thing that I've been missing. Yeah

How great is it that having chips in Epping Forest is part of Emma’s love story? And the point Emma made about making your own adaptations for wellbeing. I love that. Mindful walking might be the thing that gets me out of bed early again, to listen to the dawn chorus and the sounds of the freaky muntjac.

In the next episode I’m going to be digging into the witchy history of the areas that surround Epping Forest.

In the box we have a mummified cat, which was found in the walls of the Waltham Abbey church.

Talia: I’ll also be thinking about modern witchcraft. I’ll be meeting those for whom nature and the forest itself is a sacred place.

So we're going to do a little ritual. I'm going to do something that is all about gratitude and healing and saying thank you

I'm Talia Randall, and you've been listening to Voices of Epping Forest.

There were two trails highlighted in this episode. At Loughton Station, there is a waymarked pedestrian route that gets you into the forest in about 10 minutes. That's where I was with Fran.

The easy access trail that I went on with the Sunflower Group is a half a mile circular path at High Beach. There's parking and toilets at the start of this trail, but check in advance for detail, and definitely check the opening times of the car park.

Details of more routes including easy access trails are available at the Epping Forest Heritage Trust website and at the City of London Corporation website. There are details of the terrain, toilets, expected time. There's also a free app with guided walks and info about the forest. Search Epping Forest Walks in the app store.

If you've enjoyed this episode, subscribe and leave a review. It really does help get the podcast out there to more people. And of course, we love it when you share it with a friend.

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