Wheelchair Plates
Enabling the Disabled

Every state in the USA issues wheelchair plates, making it the most popular license plate graphic of all time.

They are considered one of the first special issue license plates ever. These pieces of tin go by many names including, wheelchair, disabled, and the less popular description, handicapped. They are easily identified by a symbol of a person seated in a wheelchair. The logo was designed almost forty years ago and today remains one of the most recognized icons in the world. Usually you need a letter from a doctor or some other proof to obtain these plates. The plates aren’t just restricted to cars; you can spot them on pickup trucks, motor homes, and even motorcycles.

Wheelchair plates are among the few that allow the vehicle to park in designated spacing and in some cases exempt them from paying parking meters. Collecting these plates takes an especially patient person because there are many different types it can take years to complete the set.

International Symbol of Access

Who knew a sketch by a Danish design student would go on to become one of the most recognizable symbols in the world? In 1969 a competition was held to find a picture that indicates a facility is accessible to people in wheelchairs and with other physical disabilities. After some discussion the winning design was submitted by Susan Kofoed. Ms Kofoed drew a profile view of a stick figure with a tadpole’s head on top of three-quarters of a body. Two of the judges suggested the addition of a head to the stick figure. The judges still weren’t pleased one of the judges described it as awful even as a symbol of specific wheelchair access due to its ugliness and its strange Borg-like union of tadpole-figured man and machine. People compared it to some kind of alien anal probe. However it was the best design and the committee approved it. They then discussed a label and decided to call it the International Symbol of Access.

No Words Needed

When it is displayed on road signs and in public buildings the International Symbol of Access is traditionally featured as a white figure on a blue background. The colors are sometimes displayed in a reversed fashion, meaning a blue figure appears on a white background. Arrows can also be included under the logo to direct the person to an accessible entrance or exit into a public build-
More Than Just Passenger Issues
Disabled license plates aren't just restricted to passenger cars. The International Symbol of Access has been spotted on all kinds of vehicles. States that issue combination truck plates, like Connecticut for example. A big farming state like Wisconsin has issued farm truck plates with the logo before the number. Iowa holds the distinction of having the largest variety of license plates with the wheelchair logo on them. In New York a ham radio plate was spotted with the usual symbol along with the regular antenna graphic.

There has been a push for the motor vehicle departments to make the logo available on optional plates so drivers with disabilities have the ability to express themselves just like every other motorist on the road.

Disabled Cycle Riders
States across the country from Arizona to Virginia allow wheelchair plates to be placed on the back of motorcycles as well. In 1973 Georgia became the first state to issue wheelchair plates on motorcycles states like Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, New York and Virginia all followed suit. Oklahoma issued disabled motorcycle plates after a rider with an artificial leg filed a petition with the state DMV. This plate is among the rarest disabled motorcycle plate out there and has only been spotted in Oklahoma City.

Placards, Too
Every state in the USA issues wheelchair plates; however, placards are another option besides having a permanent license plate attached to the vehicle. These special signs hang from the vehicle's rear view mirror and are issued to the person, not to the vehicle itself. So if the person uses another vehicle he or she can just transfer the placard from one vehicle to another easily, especially now that leasing cars instead of buying them has become the new trend. This is useful for people like myself who can't drive an automobile, I can allow my friends to not have to worry about finding a close parking space because I have my placard with me. By having window placard it allows the person to purchase specialty plates, like the New Jersey Meadowlands license plate without having to sacrifice the ability the park in spaces reserved for people with disabilities.

Placard Types
They come in two different colors, red and blue, and are also available through the DMV. The red placards are issued temporarily if the person has injured him or herself and need the disabled parking is needed until he or she recuperates from the injury. They usually expire within a month of being issued. For folks with a permanent disability, like myself, the states issue a blue placard that has to be renewed every couple of years. Each placard has an unique number that is entered into the state DMV computers, just like a regular license plate. Oregon is the only state in the union that currently does not issue disabled plates, only the window placards. In order to use the placards the person with the disability has to carry an id card that matches the number on the placard.

Collecting Wheelchair Plates
Wheelchair plates are one of the most common runs in the collecting world today, although the run is far from easy to complete. Among the hardest to get are Washington DC, Oklahoma and of course Oregon. When I started on my own walking around age three my parents decided to apply for a placard to gain access to closer parking so I wouldn't have far to walk. Then they bought a new car and decided to obtain license plates because the placard show signs of aging. We have since gone back to using a placard because they are a little more durable now and ideal for folks who lease cars. Years later when I got into collecting plates, I found our old plates on a self in the garage, my father never can throw anything away! That was in 1994, eleven years later I have thirty-one plates in my collection. ☝️

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