

FUNDAMENTALS OF FIELD NOTEBOOKS

A field journal is essential for a scientist's fieldwork. When you go on into the field, you will record all your observations, thoughts, and questions in your field journal. The goal is to record your observations, the context for those observations, and other thoughts, ideas and reflections about what you are seeing. Your field journal will be unique to you and your style.

You will see amazing and unusual things, and may convince yourself that you will remember the details forever (or even until later in the day). Unfortunately our memories don't work this way – so jot down your observations and interpretations in the field. Make sure the difference between observation and interpretation is obvious.

Remember – for most jobs, field notes are legal FOIA-able documents. Be careful not to let anything appear in your field notes that could be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Be accurate clear, complete and as concise as possible. If you cannot read or interpret it, you will not be able to use the information.

Making truly valuable, understandable field notes takes effort – To take good notes require alertness, care, accuracy, neatness, intelligence and ecological knowledge.

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Methods of note taking and field notebooks are different for different kinds of work. The suggestions here are for NRM 4301 Tropical Avian Ecology.

General Suggestions for Field Notes

- Use a good quality notebook that will withstand hard use – rain, humidity, being dropped overboard, etc... Bound journals are easier for this class
- Waterproof pages are useful (I use), but it is harder to create detailed drawings
- Writing utensils
 - Hard, sharp pencil – they are easy to sharpen in field and can handle getting wet
 - Waterproof ink (even if your paper is not waterproof) can work
 - Colored pencils to enhance and clarify sketches
 - Do not use pen or pencils that are soft enough to blur
- Your writing must be legible, so you may have to print neater than you normally do
- Make sure your notes are not crowded – this gives you room for reflection
- Know your purpose for the notes before you enter the field. It will help you identify important information to record
- Field notes are written records of work and observations made at the time the work is done. Notes, such as remembered details, hypotheses and reflections, can be included – but should be clearly labeled

Contents of your field notebook

- You should have a title page for your notebook (e.g. NRM 4324 & 4301 Tropical Conservation and Tropical Avian Ecology July 2017). Make sure your name and date range are included
- Always include a date (including the year) and time of your observation
- When you head to a new location, indicate in your field notebook
- Trust nothing to memory - write everything down. When in doubt whether you will need the information, write it down anyway
 - Remember to take in the context – don't just describe the bird, also describe the environment, weather, and other things around the bird. This context can be important.
 - Information to consider: date, elevation, approximate slope and aspect, weather conditions, structure of vegetation, shading, participants, other organisms close by, disturbances, type of equipment you are using
 - More explanatory information: thoughts, ideas, hypotheses, contradictory ideas, plans
 - Note/sketch interesting behaviors and plumages as well as unusual birds. If you sketch – include notes to help you remember details
- Sketches
 - Seeing and observing are two different things. We see to identify, but that doesn't include all the details. Recording observations means going beyond identification to include the details and context of the situation
 - You don't have to be an artist – it's a skill that builds with practice
 - Include a scale on all sketches – it is hard to remember size when you get out of the field
 - Make your proportions relative
 - Don't crowd your sketch – you have plenty of room in your notebook
 - Use a straightedge for linear
 - Read and think about 'Helpful Hints for Field Sketching' put together by the American Museum of Natural History (you can do an internet search for it)
(<http://www.amnh.org/explore/curriculum-collections/biodiversity-counts/plant-identification/helpful-hints-for-field-sketching/>)
- Data collection
 - Write the numbers large and uncrowded (you can infer a word, but not a number)
 - If you change something, draw a single line through the incorrect information. Do not write on top of the old number
 - Include units
- Take time at the end of the day to reflect on what was covered. What did you learn that was new, what surprised you and why? Have the activities raised any questions – what are they?

References:

Rowe and Koch 2010 University of Santa Cruz

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/take-note-tips-for-keeping-a-field-notebook/>

https://www.amnh.org/learn/biodiversity_counts/read_select/hs/fieldjnl.htm