

A Short Primer on Keeping Field Notes

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Field notes are your personal record of research trips and other kinds of field trips. In this class, a field notebook is required. We will check your notes and make comments on them. One of the other professors will give a lecture on field notes and different forms of taking data at the beginning of the course. Anyone may look at my book to see how I do it, but there are different systems that work for different people.

Field notes don't help much if you write them for one or two days and stop. But if you write your notes all the time when you go on trips, suddenly you will have something very useful. I have used my notes for the obviously important reasons of keeping track of what I have seen heard or detected in the field, and also to create lists of species I observed but wasn't able to collect. I use field notes to document how to return to localities that were hard to find, or maybe accidentally discovered, to remember hotels and restaurants in foreign countries, to calculate mileage for income taxes, and remember names of people who participated in various aspects of the trip. Without notes, the field trip days become a blur very fast. It becomes impossible to remember where you were on what day, what you saw that day, who saw what, and what the weather was like.

There are two separate books I carry:

1. a catalog of specimens collected
2. field notes

Both my catalog and field book are kept in the bound field books that were made available to you. On the right page is a numbered listing of each preserved specimen. In columns across the page are the number, date, tentative identification, precise locality of each specimen. I usually make color notes in life on the facing page. On the facing page I also note whether the specimen was dead when found, whether it was photographed, if tissue or other genetic material was saved, whether the specimen was tadpoles, adult, male, female etc. If you are a collector, I strongly recommend you keep your journal separate from your catalog.

My journal is also written on the right page of my book. People keep their journals different ways. I write mine like a little story about the trip. "I saw a coachwhip among the yucca, but missed it. If Toby had been with me I think we could have gotten her. She was adult, and pretty. Incredibly red. The wind was blowing all day like crazy and we finally got so sick of sand in our ears that we finished the day in the car to stay out of the wind, writing notes and telling jokes. The table on the previous page lists all the species we have seen or caught on this trip."

I leave the facing page of my field book blank. I do this for several reasons: The first is probably because that's how my professor taught me to do it! The second reason is because I use the facing page for data, such as weights and measures of a series of specimens, specific behavioral observations, tables of frog species seen and if they were calling, in amplexus, seen, heard only, etc. I also use the facing page as free space so that I can fill in details that I might have momentarily forgotten while I was drafting the notes.

This is an example of the kind of data I might include on the facing page of my journal:

species	calling	seen	heard only	found in amplexus	collected
Bufo pygmaeus	x	x		x	8
Hyla nana		x			1

On a long trip, I write weather summaries on the facing page every few days. The facing page is where I paste business cards, write shopping lists, make equipment inventories, do scratch calculations, diagrams, sketch maps, and add additional comments to notes already written. The facing page of my notes contains many Nobel-prize winning ideas, experimental designs, and outlines for papers that will surely be a gold mine for biologists for centuries! (I wish)

One of the most important things to remember about field notes is that they are as much for others as they are for you. If no one can read your handwriting, tell what you are talking about, or determine where you were and when you were there, your notes are practically useless. Both the catalog and field notes should be photocopied and given to museums where you deposit specimens. Some museums require the original field books and keep them in fire-proof safes.