

## GUIDELINES FOR FIELD NOTES

### Why Keep Field Notes?

Every good naturalist takes notes in the field. How else can we reliably remember what the exact date was, what the weather conditions were like, what condition the habitat was in, what plants or animals we saw, what behaviors were observed, etc.? Observation is a fundamental component to all scientific endeavors. Without detailed accounts of natural history observations, we cannot accurately and reliably draw upon our observations at a later date to make inferences and predictions. Keeping field notes will force you to make systematic, detailed observations while on the field trips. In addition, the discipline of keeping organized field notes is a basic skill for all biologists who work in the field or laboratory and should prove useful in the future.

### Required Format

In the field, use a small notebook to quickly record observations and measurements. At the end of the day or after the field trip, neatly record information into a more permanent record. In the past, this was in the form of neatly written notes placed in a loose-leaf binder (eventually bound), but in this day of word processing, most natural historians now record their field notes using a word processor; please use this approach by turning in typed fieldnotes generated from the notes you took in the field. Pages should be *stapled together* before turning them in.

For each day, outing, or location, two types of entries should be made: Journal and Species Accounts. The **Journal** is a summary of information about where and when you went, the conditions and environments encountered, and who was with you. It should include a list of species that you observed, presented in systematic order. **Species Accounts** include detailed observations, notes, and sketches of organisms and are divided by species. These sections are described in more detail below. Keep in mind that field notes should be based on *your observations* and *not on information gleaned elsewhere*. No literature search is required; indeed, no literature reference should be included (unless contrasting your observations with information presented in a field guide).

In the field, use indelible ink or a #3 or harder pencil on good quality paper (i.e., that can withstand some dampness, etc.).

**Cover Page.** Your field notes should have a cover page that has your name, the course (LSC 322— *Fundamentals of Ecology Lab*), and the year (2011).

**Journal.** For each day and/or location, you should make a separate entry. The journal should begin with “**Journal**” as the heading, followed by the date and location as subheadings. It is helpful to make the subheadings stand out using *italic*.

Locality heading should be as complete as possible: include the name of the specific place visited (named park, refuge, mountain range, trail, river or stream, etc.), nearest town or city, county, state, and country. If available, also include elevation and latitude and longitude.

Include the date as a subheading: *always write out the month and year* (e.g., 1 January 2000).

Write the body of the journal as one or more paragraphs and include the following:

- Time of day: include both start/arrival time and the time you left.
- Weather conditions while you were in the field, including available sunlight, cloud cover, precipitation, temperature, wind conditions, etc.
- Major habitats. What is the terrain (topography) like? What is the vegetation type? Is vegetation patchy or dense?
- What did you do while in the field? What route (e.g., names of trails, distance travelled) did you take?
- What was the purpose of your trip (e.g., plant survey, bird observations)?
- Who was with you (i.e., were you alone or with a field trip)? Provide a list of names, or at least the name of the group leader (e.g., Udo Savalli). This is useful for corroboration of observations and species identifications.

Finally, include a list of all species you observed (sometimes called a Catalog). This should be in a *list format*, not paragraph form.

- You may use either english or scientific names (or both).
- You do not need to be too concerned about keeping a specific sequence (formal field notes are kept in phylogenetic order) except to organize by kingdom and phylum.
- You can also give additional *brief* information in your species list, such as the number of individuals seen or circumstances of the observation (*but not more than a line or two*). If you made more detailed observations in a species account, this can be indicated by adding “see species account.”

**Species Accounts.** The species accounts sections contain detailed observations on physical characteristics, field markings, size, habitat, natural history, and/or behavior *you observed*. You may also include sketches if relevant.

*Each species account should be headed by the name of the species.* Use locations and dates as the subheadings.

Species accounts should be in the same sequence as the species list in the journal section.

Although you are encouraged to produce a species account whenever you encounter a new plant or animal in the field, *you do not need to produce a species account for every species observed*. Instead, restrict species accounts to those species for which you made more detailed observations (more than a line or two). You should produce at least 5 species accounts per field trip. (Future observations of the same species should be added to the end of that species’ account, but separated by the date of observation and locality heading.)

In general, use simple descriptions when describing behavior of animals and avoid anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics or emotions) or jumping to conclusions (you may speculate about function and such, but it should be kept to a minimum since field notes are based on observations).