

Preparing and Maintaining a Collection Fieldbook

Although we all create electronic documents whenever possible for the sake of convenience and ease of update, there are still a few cases where hardcopy documentation is needed. For field mycologists, one of these is the fieldbook, or field notebook, or collection book. These are taken on fieldtrips in order to record the collection data that will be used to generate specimen labels, and if maintained faithfully, become a permanent document of collection activities. Fieldbooks of historical collectors have been used to clear up discrepancies or inaccuracies on specimen labels, and to get an insight in to how field biologists conducted research in an earlier age.

We continue to maintain fieldbooks because they are a permanent record of collections that can be used without electricity or internet connection, and are not subject to loss due to computer failure or software incompatibility. The data in a hardcopy fieldbook cannot easily be deleted or accidentally written over. The fieldbook is the field mycologist's equivalent to the chemist's lab notebook.

Choice of a fieldbook

Most field mycologists choose a book with a hard cover (not spiral bound, or with pages that are perforated, hole-punched, or removable in any way). Most prefer that the book have lined paper. It is possible to purchase such a book in many places. The Herbarium Supply Co. sells a field book that has a waterproof cover and acid-free paper – and there are likely many other suppliers as well.

How to record data in a fieldbook

Field mycologists usually take their fieldbook on a field trip with them, but often leave it in their work area, along with their dryer, microscope, etc. While actually out in the field, they will write down localities, notes about habit or habitat, on a temporary notepad (often of a small size that can fit in a pocket). Some field biologists prefer to rely entirely on their memory while in the field.

Upon returning from the field, the field mycologist will record each collection locality visited that day, in chronological order, wherever possible. Use permanent ink when writing in your fieldbook. Record the geographic locality (country, state, county, municipality, if relevant, specific location) and then any vegetation or other habitat data. Number each specimen, taking care not to duplicate numbers used before, by writing a number on each line. Next to the number you will record the name of the fungus (if they know it already), substrate or habit data, and sometimes other information, such as an indication of whether or not a photo was taken, or macroscopic or microscopic notes. The collection number is then also copied on to a slip of paper that goes with the specimen to the dryer.

It is very easy to duplicate numbers – everyone does this eventually! When this happens, most people will add a suffix, such as “a”, “b” “c”.

Maintaining a fieldbook

To make your fieldbook as useful as possible, record the determinations in the book once made. Add the genus, species and authority, if possible. Add the name of the determiner and the date of determination, if someone else determined it. If one of your specimens becomes a type for a new species, or is used as a voucher in any way, it is useful to note this in your fieldbook next to the entry for that specimen.

Archiving your Fieldbooks

You should periodically make photocopies of your fieldbooks so that they could be re-created if lost. If you donate your collections to an established herbarium, the curator will appreciate a copy of your fieldbook as well. Such items are commonly added to library archives, so please deposit your fieldbook there, if not with an herbarium. Do not throw your fieldbook away, if your collections still exist!