

General health and safety information for volunteer fieldworkers



This leaflet contains notes on good practice, which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful before undertaking fieldwork

01/09

The term fieldwork covers all types of ornithological research work done on behalf of the BTO, including surveying, nest recording and ringing.

Volunteer responsibility. As a volunteer, you are under no obligation to participate or continue with a survey or scheme. Volunteers are responsible for their own health and safety, and should not put themselves in a position that could place them, or others, in danger. You should never undertake any work if you have concerns about your own or others' health and safety. If you have any such concerns, you should stop the work and raise these with the BTO or the local survey organiser. You are under no obligation to visit a particular site, even if the organisers have requested it (although data collected from another site may not be usable).

Access permission. Always obtain permission from the relevant landowners or tenant to enter any private land not subject to open access legislation, before commencing fieldwork. Do not continue fieldwork if access permission is later revoked. A letter confirming your participation in BTO fieldwork can be provided on request. You may not need permission to count birds on open access land (in Scotland, please consult section 3.64 of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code). It is courteous to contact the landowner and explain what you are doing and why, when it is practical to do so. Ringers must obtain permission to ring. Please abide by The Countryside Code and the Scottish OAC (see 'Further Information' below).

Risk assessment. Before undertaking any activities, every fieldworker should consider the particular health and safety hazards associated with their individual study sites and whether their individual circumstances and medical conditions expose them to particular hazards. Individuals should assess any potential risks arising from their fieldwork activities, which should include considering the risks specific to individual sites. You should think about what precautions should be taken against any risks. If you have any concerns, please raise these with the BTO or local survey organiser.

Health and safety reporting. Fieldworkers should pass on health and safety information provided to them by the BTO to other people helping them with BTO-related activities. You are encouraged to report any particular health and safety issues about the survey methods or the survey sites to the BTO or local survey organiser.

Mobile telephones. It is advisable to carry a mobile phone, which may be useful in case of an emergency. Please note that mobile phone may not work in some remote areas, and are only of any use if you are conscious and capable of operating them.

Working in remote areas.

- If going to a remote place, always leave a note of your whereabouts with a responsible person. This should include: date and time of departure, method of

travel to and around the site, proposed itinerary, expected time of leaving the site and return to base, and vehicle identification details. The person to whom these details are given should be told whom to contact if you do not return and at what time to raise the alarm. If possible, do not work alone.

- If working in mountains, moorlands or unpredictable and extreme environments, hypothermia is a significant hazard. In such situations, it is appropriate to wear footwear with good ankle support and to carry warm and waterproof clothing. Carry a map and compass and know how to use them. Carry a whistle, waterproof watch and where appropriate, a survival bag with extra high-energy food supplies.
- Avoid or abandon outdoor activities in bad weather.

Fieldwork at night or in the evening. When working into the hours of darkness, carry a torch and spare batteries. Where appropriate, inform local police and other locals of your intended area of operations. Be extra vigilant at night and wear something bright or reflective when walking on roads. If possible, do not work alone.

Livestock and agricultural machinery. Take special care when entering areas with livestock, especially cattle, rams and horses. Do not enter fields containing bulls and be especially cautious with farm dogs. Rutting deer can also be aggressive in the autumn. Avoid undertaking fieldwork in close proximity to working agricultural machinery or forestry operations.

What to do if a strange dog approaches you.

- Stay still – do not run away. Drop anything you are holding in case this is what has attracted the dog to you. Do not shout or wave your arms. Calmly and softly give a command such as ‘sit’ or ‘stay’, as many dogs respond to these.
- Avoid eye contact – Do not look the dog directly in the eye as this can be seen as a form of aggression and a challenge. Watch their chest, shoulder or look at the tip of their nose.
- Ignore the dog if it jumps up – do not shout or push the dog down, as it may think it is a game. Stay still and do not respond and it may eventually get bored and walk away. If you are knocked to the ground, remain motionless in the foetal position and protect your face by crossing your arms above your head.
- Move very slowly – when you do move, move slowly and stay facing the dog.

Visiting nest sites.

- Check for wasps, hornets and fleas when visiting or cleaning out nest boxes. Deserted eggs can only be legally removed from nest boxes between 1 August and 31 January, and must be destroyed and not kept. Nest boxes without eggs should be cleaned out wearing gloves soon after the breeding season, and preferably before the onset of winter to avoid a build-up of fleas.
- Take special care when visiting the nests of birds of prey or owls. There is a risk of injury from larger species, particularly with respect to eyes. It is good practice to use safety spectacles when working with some species, particularly owls, to wear gloves when handling birds with talons, and to maintain immunity to tetanus.

Parking. Take care to park sensibly, preferably off-road, and do not block entrances.

Terrain. Take special care when carrying out fieldwork along watercourses, cliff edges, or in areas that contain boggy ground, reedbeds or loose rocks. Wear brightly coloured clothing when carrying out fieldwork along busy roads. Do not cross potentially hazardous sites, such as quarries, ravines and railway lines, and do not attempt to climb steep slopes, walls or fences. Please heed warning signs and do not enter private (non-access) land that has been deliberately obstructed by fencing or barbed wire.

Intertidal areas, including open mudflats and saltmarshes, are potentially very hazardous. You should be particularly careful if you need to go below the high water mark: check high tide times before commencing fieldwork, and allow ample time to leave the intertidal area. Remember that tides can come in very quickly and that distances can be deceptive on wide, open tidal flats. Small tidal creeks or flows can rapidly deepen on an incoming tide, thus cutting off an apparently safe retreat.

Human confrontation. Consider your personal safety when conducting fieldwork within the vicinity of known or likely trouble spots. Avoid confrontation with landowners, land workers or members of the public. Consider the privacy of residents when performing early-morning survey work in residential areas. Carry some form of identification to confirm the activities you are undertaking. If you have any concerns about your personal safety, cease fieldwork immediately.

Climbing. Fieldwork that involves climbing rocks, steep slopes, cliffs or trees may require training, special safety equipment and stringent precautions (see HSE Guide AFAG401). Fieldworkers are advised not to work alone or take unnecessary risks.

Equipment. It is important to consider the safety aspects of any equipment that is used and any associated hazards. In particular, the use of ladders to inspect nest sites can be hazardous (see HSE Guide INDG405). Fieldworkers are advised to always carry a basic first aid kit to dress any minor cuts and abrasions.

Diseases. Fieldworkers may be exposed to disease during survey work. If a disease is suspected, then it is important to inform your doctor that you may have been exposed to diseases associated with outdoor activities or the handling of birds (specifying nest visiting and ringing as appropriate). Typical diseases that may be encountered are:

- **Tetanus** may result from the infection of even minor wounds and scratches with *Clostridium tetani*, a common micro-organism in soil and one likely to be carried on talons and beaks.
- **Weil's disease** (leptospirosis) that can be fatal if left untreated. The organism is carried by rats and excreted in their urine, and persists in water such as in puddles and slow-moving rivers in rat-infested places. Thus visits to the nests of rat-eating species or places where rats might occur may pose a risk.
- **Lyme disease**, a bacterial disease transmitted by animal ticks associated with rank vegetation, which leads to severe symptoms if left untreated. A variety of animals act as hosts for the bacteria, including sheep, deer and pheasants. For more information, see: www.bada-uk.org or contact BADA-UK (PO Box 544, Wath upon Dearne, Rotherham, S63 3DW).
- **Salmonellosis** is a bacterial infection common in rats and mice (which may be found in the "larders" at raptor nests). The bacteria abound in the droppings of the

infected bird, which may not necessarily appear sick. If the bacteria are ingested, for example as a result of preparing or eating food with contaminated hands, there is a risk of 'food poisoning'.

- **Rabies.** Ringers should refer to chapter 12 of *Ringers' Manual* and articles in *Ringers' Bulletin*: Vol.10, No.12 (Winter 2002) and Vol.9, No.10 (Spring 1998) for further information regarding bats and rabies.
- **Avian Influenza.** For information, visit www.bto.org/notices/flu_statement.htm. Ringers should refer to *Ringers' Bulletin* Vol.11, No.10 (Summer 2006) and can obtain a copy of this article on the ringers' section of the BTO website.

Minimising the risk of such diseases requires straightforward actions. For example:

- Immunisation against Tetanus and Poliomyelitis.
- Remove ticks from the skin as soon as possible, wear light-coloured clothing so that ticks are visible, tuck trouser bottoms into socks so that ticks cannot attach or climb up the leg, and make regular checks of skin and hair.
- Wear disposable plastic gloves when cleaning out nest-boxes or handling dead animals, and dispose of them responsibly after use. Hands should be thoroughly cleaned after fieldwork (particularly after handling birds and soiled bird bags). Cigarettes can also transfer the infection from hands to mouth.
- During fieldwork, cover cuts and abrasions with a waterproof dressing.

Under 18s. All volunteers must inform the BTO if they are less than 18 years of age. Parents or guardians of the under-18 will be asked to sign a 'Parental Consent Form' stating that they agree to their child undertaking the activities and have made them aware of the associated risks. To obtain a copy of the Parental Consent Form, contact the Volunteer H&S Officer at the BTO (tel. 01842 750050, email: healthandsafety@bto.org).

Further information about the Countryside Code and countryside access issues can be obtained from...

Countryside Access in England: www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk (tel. 0845-100-3298)

Outdoor Access Scotland: www.outdooraccess-scotland.com (tel. 01738-458545)

Northern Ireland: www.countrysiderecreation.com (tel. 028-90303930)

Countryside Council for Wales: www.ccw.gov.uk (tel. 08451-306-229)

Birdwatchers' Code: www.bto.org/notices/birdwatchers_code/intro.htm (tel. 01842-750050)

Visit www.ramblers.org.uk/info/practical/navigation.html for information on map reading and using a compass. Ringers should refer to chapter 12 of *Ringers' Manual* and *Ringers' Bulletin* Vol 11, No 10 (Summer 2006) for further health and safety information. For information on bird diseases and hygiene, visit www.bto.org/gbw/hygiene. For a wide range of health and safety information, visit the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) web site: www.hse.gov.uk (tel. 0845 345 0055). The following HSE guides are particularly relevant:

HSE Guide: AFAG401, Tree Climbing Operations.

HSE Guide: INDG163, Five Steps to Risk Assessment.

HSE Guide: INDG229, Using work equipment safely.

HSE Guide: INDG369, Why fall for it? Preventing falls in agriculture.

HSE Guide: INDG73, Working alone in safety.

This leaflet covers volunteers working in the UK. Volunteers working outside the UK should seek further information from relevant sources.