

# **Field Journaling: *Facts & Feelings***

by Michael S. Hayslett, MS

Originally created for the Fall 2006 Basic Training Course of the Central Virginia Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalist program.

## I. Essential Data (Qualifying Parameters):

1. Date (day/month/year: 3 October 2006)
2. Temperature (at the time of day)  
indicate whether °F or °C, 24-hour time or AM/PM
3. Weather Description (Phenological Importance)  
indicate influence of recent events or the previous night
4. Observers/associates (for future reference)
5. Location (County, State) SEE NOTE for item II. 4.

## II. Observation(s):

1. Sensory description of sighting, behavior, occurrence, phenomena, etc. THE BULK OF YOUR FIELD NOTE  
  
You should use clear/concise and thorough descriptors; if for later keying/identification, provide the basic, diagnostic characters (e.g., flowering parts for herbaceous plants or plumage markings for birds).
2. Sketch if possible (esp. if for later ID); diagramming is often the easiest way to describe a complex site or habitat.
3. Indicate if photographs were taken and how many.

4. **Rule** for biogeography records (flora/fauna reports important to the range/occurrence for a selected species):

Provide the “**distance and direction from a fixed landmark**”

(e.g., “0.25 mi. SW of Rt. 60 crossing with the James River”)

Fixed landmarks = road intersections (use state route numbers like “VA 626”), lakes, stream crossings, post offices for rural communities...

Lat/Long coordinates (from GPS unit or topographic maps) can be included, but should be qualified by the above description, in the event of technical error and for returning purposes.

### III. Personal Impressions:

1. Include your theories, appreciation or reminiscences (to be able to look back on how you felt at the time, or know how feelings have changed over time)

Though transparency is sometimes difficult (emotional candor was rare in journals before the Civil War), these “feelings” will be particularly precious if your journals survive you and are past down to subsequent generations.

### IV. Miscellaneous Journaling Tips:

1. Use a #2 or hard lead pencil on good quality paper, preferably a hard-bound book for durability and longevity (ink will fade and disappear with time; pencil will not smear or run as can ink, and pencil can write on damp paper). Permanent or indelible ink may be used, but pencil is traditional and practical (you can sharpen it with your pocket knife).

2. Write your narrative on the right-hand page of your journal only (include date on each page; numbering pages is also helpful) and reserve the left-hand page for your illustration or future addendum notes/revisions. When you reach the end, then turn your journal upside down and write on the blank pages back to the beginning of the journal. This also conserves paper.
3. Keep your journal in a consistent location (treat it like your wallet, watch, purse, keys, etc.)

Daily journaling can become addictive, therapeutic, introspective, cathartic and even historically valuable (i.e., for your great-grandchild, or especially if the world's electronic information systems crash and we *return to the stone age.*)

### Final Thought:

Naturalists (unlike ecologists\*) are not “immune to values”...  
Balance facts with feelings in your journal entries!

\*By comparison, Natural History deals with *observation*, whereas Natural Sciences (e.g., ecology) are about *experimentation*; both are important in understanding Nature.

