

Submitting biological records in Highland: a guide to best practice

Many groups in Highland are now engaged in recording plants and animals as part of LBAP or other biodiversity projects. All records obtained in these exercises are welcomed by the Highland Biological Recording Group, which currently holds the taxon (species) database for Highland, provided that the record meets certain minimum requirements. Records which do not meet these requirements may be useful for education or awareness raising, but are not eligible for inclusion in formal databases. This paper explains what is needed, and why the standards are set in this way.

What is a taxon record?

In essence a taxon record is a set of data that describes the occurrence of a **species** on a **date** in a **place** seen by an **observer** and **identified** by someone who is competent to do so. Extra information may be added, such as notes on number, age, sex, behaviour, food and so on. The basic data are often referred to as '**what, when, where and who**'.

What are the components of a record?

Multiple records are usually submitted in the form of a table with (fairly) standard headings, as in the table below:

Species	Date	Place (Location, or Site)	Grid reference (NGR)	Observer (Recorder)	Determiner
<i>Lepus timidus</i>	12 July 2008	Ben Wyvis	NH458677	Mary Brown	Joe White

Any other relevant heading may be added (Altitude, Number or Abundance, Age and sex, Habitat, Comment).

More information on completing the essential columns follows.

Heading	Indicates...	Sample entry	Invalid or unsatisfactory entries	Comments
Species	The exact name of the species seen.	Red Deer (an unambiguous English name) <i>Lestes sponsa</i> (a Latin or scientific name)	Deer, bat, bumblebee, buttercup (none of these refers to a single species).	English should only be used where the name is <i>absolutely</i> unambiguous. English is usually acceptable for vertebrates, butterflies, some moths, dragonflies, some plants, and a very few other groups. Latin should be used wherever possible.
Date	The date on which it was seen.	12 July 2008 12/7/2008 July 2008 2008 1 May 2008 - 1 June 2008	A few years ago (too vague - if you have no other option, use e.g. 1999 - 2001).	Be very careful if entering dates in spreadsheets. If possible, format the cells as text to avoid a multitude of problems.
Place	The place of the observation, on a moderate scale of precision.	Dingwall Glen Affric Loch Droma	Highland (too vague); Back garden at 23 Gasworks Road Inverness (too precise).	Place names should be at the settlement/ loch/ mountain/ valley scale.
Grid reference (NGR)	The National Grid Reference of the sighting.	NH123456 NH1245 NH14	NH (mapping cannot be done at resolutions less than 10km). 28/123456 (this format can be used, but is not recommended).	A minimum 6-figure (100m) NGR is preferred. In extremis, postcodes may be used, and in some cases the NGR may be derived from the place name. If both place and NGR are given, there is a check for errors.
Observer	The name of the person who saw the species.	Joe White Mary Brown	The lady next door; Jimmy (too vague).	This may allow necessary follow-up checks to be made.
Determiner	The name of the person who identified the species (very often this is the same as the Observer).	Joe White Mary Brown	The lady next door; Jimmy (too vague).	The determiner is vital, as many species cannot be identified by non-specialists. An experienced determiner usually means a reliable record, but if the determiner is not known to be a specialist he/she may have to be contacted or the record discarded.

How can I be sure of my identification?

Many things are easy, but it is often necessary to refer to technical works or specialists to be certain. HBRG has many local experts who may be able to identify from specimens or in some cases photographs. If you have specimens or pictures, send them to the address below. With few exceptions, popular works and pocket field guides are not adequate for critical identification, especially of plants and invertebrates.

How can I find the Grid Reference (NGR)?

A list of resources offering advice on deriving NGRs appears on the HBRG website, 'Submitting records' page. For residential areas, a postcode may be given as an alternative.

Why are these standards set?

Our records are used by naturalists, scientists, statutory agencies, planning authorities and their consultants to inform research and decisions. For these purposes, databases must be as accurate as possible, and conform to the highest standards. Any laxity could in theory result in applications being refused, or made subject to costly and stringent conditions if it is wrongly claimed that rare species occur on the site. The standards aim to avoid any such problems.

What species should be recorded?

Any species at all that are wild or naturalised in Highland. Don't report garden flowers, escaped parrots, or farm animals. Just about anything else will be welcomed! Use judgement in reporting species you see in the same place frequently - 365 records of a Blackbird in your garden between 1 Jan and Hogmanay will be condensed into a single record!

Where can I record?

We take records mainly from Highland, but will accept them from anywhere in the UK. Records from remote parts of Scotland (e.g. hills, glens, uninhabited islands), and from Lochaber and Caithness, can be especially valuable.

How should a record be reported?

Single records, if they have the essential components as above, may be reported in any way that is convenient - 'phone, letter, email, postcard and so on. Large numbers of records are best compiled in a spreadsheet - a blank Excel worksheet is available for download on the HBRG website. However, lists on paper will be accepted too.

What happens to submitted records?

HBRG has a standard set of conditions, available on the website, relating to the use of taxon records. These are:

- Data will be available for any use within HBRG unless otherwise specified at the time of submission by the original recorder.
- Data will be made freely available publicly at no charge for any non-profit making purpose relevant to the work of HBRG unless otherwise specified at the time of submission by the original recorder.
- HBRG may charge commercial enquirers (planning consultants etc.) for the search of our database - the data themselves are free, the charge is for the service provided.
- Data may be passed to recognised national recording schemes unless otherwise specified at the time of submission by the original recorder.
- Data may be placed on the NBN gateway with full public access unless otherwise specified at the time of submission by the original recorder.
- Data may be subject to validation and accuracy checks by HBRG, and may be reformatted to fit the requirements of the final databases. Obvious errors may be corrected without reference to the original recorder.
- Personal information in the datasets will normally comprise only the name of the recorder and determiner.
- Sensitive records may be stored at full NGR resolution, but made available publicly at a lower resolution at the request of the original recorder or if it is considered appropriate. In these situations, full NGRs will be passed only to approved groups or individuals with good reason to see the data.
- Recorders wishing to retain control over data for their own purposes (e.g. pending publications) should either delay submission to HBRG, or (preferably) submit it with a request that the data or specified parts of it should not be made public until HBRG is notified otherwise.
- Recorders wishing to discuss the use of their data should contact HBRG at records@hbrg.org.uk

Where should records be sent?

Send any records to me at the address below, or to any member of the HBRG committee. All contributions meeting the criteria are valuable to our knowledge of wildlife in Highland.

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