

Health and safety information for volunteer fieldworkers

The term fieldwork covers all types of ornithological research work done on behalf of the BTO, RSPB or other conservation organisations including surveying, nest recording and ringing. This guide covers some of the important factors in ensuring your safety while undertaking fieldwork.

This guide is adapted from the BTO's Health and Safety guidelines (<https://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/take-part-project/health-safety>).

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 local survey organiser. You are under no obligation to visit a particular site, even if the organisers have requested it.

Access permission

Always obtain permission from the relevant landowner 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 fieldwork can be provided on request. You may not need permission to count birds on open access land. It is courteous to contact the landowner and explain what you are doing and why, when it is practical to do so. Please abide by The Countryside Code (see 'Further Information' below).

Risk assessment

Before undertaking any activities, every fieldworker should consider the health and safety hazards associated with their individual study sites and whether their individual circumstances and medical conditions expose them to 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 survey organiser directly.

Health and safety reporting

Fieldworkers should pass on health and safety information provided to them by the survey organiser to other people helping. You are encouraged to report any health and safety issues about the survey methods or the survey sites to the 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 phones 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.
- Avoid or abandon outdoor activities in bad weather.

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. Avoid undertaking fieldwork near 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.

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 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. Be vigilant when walking on, near and when crossing roads, even in quiet rural areas.

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.

Equipment

It is important to consider the safety aspects of any equipment that is used and any associated hazards. 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. Typical diseases that may be encountered are:

- 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 domestic mammals, wild mammals and birds. For more information see: www.lymediseaseaction.org.uk or www.lymediseaseuk.com.
- 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 places where rats might occur may pose a risk.
- Salmonellosis is a bacterial infection common in rats and mice. The bacteria abound in the droppings of infected predatory birds, which may not necessarily appear sick. If the bacteria are ingested, for example because of preparing or eating food with contaminated hands, there is a risk of 'food poisoning'.
- Avian Influenza. [Read our guidance on Avian flu..](#)

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.
- During fieldwork, cover cuts and abrasions with a waterproof dressing.

Under 18s

All volunteers must inform the survey organiser 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.

Additional resources

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

- Countryside Access in England: www.gov.uk/right-of-way-open-access-land/overview
- Birdwatcher's Code: [Birdwatcher's Code](#) (PDF, 167.20 KB)

Visit www.ramblers.org.uk/advice/navigation.aspx for information on map reading and using a compass.