

What is a biological record?



From field to final report: The full story

Biological records have a long life – from the time they are first noted down, through various stages of validation and verification and then to storage. But it doesn't stop there. They don't sit in cardboard box gathering dust; they are made available to thousands of people for local, national and even international purposes. Read on to find out more.



In the field

Natasha stooped down – she circled 'Glech hed' on the recording form. She had spotted *Glechoma hederacea* – more commonly known as ground-ivy. A record is born!

This brings the total number of plants Natasha has recorded today on her local village green space to 65. Natasha's working with the local parish council who own the land to find out how the green can be better managed for wildlife - their first step is to find out what's living there at the moment.

Along with recording forms for other species, such as butterflies and moths, Natasha sends her plant records (including that of *Glechoma hederacea*) to the Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre. Natasha has asked her Local Records Centre to collate the records, analyse them and send them onto the county recorders so that they can be added to the county datasets.

At the office

Natasha's bundle of recording forms and notes arrive on the desk of the Information Officer at the Lincolnshire Environmental Record Centre.

Using specialised software, the Information Officer sets aside a special area of the database for Natasha's records. When the data

entry is completed this will allow specific questions to be asked about Natasha's records – such as how many different species have been recorded or how often the village green was visited.

Before inputting the records, the Information Officer checks to make sure Natasha has included all the information needed to make a record:

- **who** saw it,
- **where** it was seen,
- **when** it was seen, and perhaps most importantly,
- **what** was seen!

However, just because you don't know what something is doesn't mean you can't record it. There are plenty of local experts who can help you out - a photo, sketch or detailed description is an excellent place to start.

When was that?

The Information Officer spots something strange with one of Natasha's records. The date is given as 31 April!

A quick phone call solves the problem and the mystery of the impossible date is solved – it was the 1 May. The Information Officer checks the rest of the data and everything looks fine.

Achieving more for nature

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The first recording form is for the butterflies seen on the green – in total 7 different sorts have been recorded. The form uses the common names of butterflies to identify which were seen, but this is okay as these are well known and not likely to cause confusion.

Some other species can have a number of common names – or the same common name can be applied to a few different species! This is especially true of plants. If in doubt, always try to give the scientific name of a species to avoid confusion, or indicate which identification guide you are using.

Putting it in its place

Each one of Natasha's records gets its own place and number in the database. This uniquely identifies every record. Any comments or measurements are also logged – this information can be vital for assessing populations or when it comes to confirming the record.

It takes a day or two for the Information Officer to work through Natasha's records – but once the information is in the database, the hard work is done.

The Information Officer produces a list of species that Natasha recorded – along with information like how rare it is in the country or if it's a Biodiversity Action Plan priority species. The Information Officer also sends the records to the county recorders. Each one is the local expert for their group of species.

Are you sure that's what it was?

One of Natasha's records stands out. Slender trefoil is a plant of southeast England, West Ireland and Scotland that doesn't normally occur in Lincolnshire. However, it can be confused with the more common lesser trefoil.

The county recorder asks Natasha if she took a photo of the plant or has a sample of leaf, fruit or flower that can be used to confirm the identification. Natasha suspected the plant was unusual at the time and took a number of photos and noted the exact location.

From the photos, the county recorder confirms that it is in fact the more common of the two trefoils, but is a drought-stressed and slightly misshapen specimen!

The record is amended in the database but is marked with notes and determination by the county recorder added as an audit trail.

The end... or is it?

Once Natasha's records have all been input and checked by the county recorders, it may seem that their life is over. But it doesn't stop there.

Two weeks after Natasha submitted her records the Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre is asked to provide information on notable species that may be affected by a development near the village green.

One of Natasha's records, Cornflower, is a Biodiversity Action Plan species. On learning that near their new development is a priority species, the developers are not only able to ensure that they won't be doing away with any Cornflower plants, but they are also able to create some habitat that will hopefully ensure the plants continued survival in the village.

Out into the world

And Natasha's records don't stop there. Once they are made available on the National Biodiversity Network Gateway – a shop window for biological data – they can be used by anyone.

From university students just beginning their course in learning about the natural world to scientists from across the globe investigating how nature interacts. Everyday somebody will be using Natasha's records.



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