Biological Records Submissions – A Few Extra Hints & Tips

Andy Young

As a data entry volunteer in the WBRC office I feel that I have got to know many of our Worcestershire biological recorders quite well through all your numerous submissions when you have been recording all our wonderful wildlife in the county. It's become very apparent that many of you are using modern techniques and technology to generate location data, and then using spreadsheets like Excel to report your findings. At the WBRC office we check for any obvious typos or errors on any submissions and carefully check that everything makes sense before the data is imported and finally submitted to the NBN database. In the time that I have been helping in the office, there have been a couple of areas where a small change on the part of the recorder would really help us to be more efficient. These areas include the format for grid references and a potential trap with the "autofill" function in Excel.

Taking the grid reference format first, we are happy to take grid references at any level of resolution that you see as appropriate for your record, from 4 figure e.g. SO9145 which gives a 1km square, up to a 10 figure reference eg SO9135445179 which gives a 1m square. We'd prefer the highest resolution that's appropriate for your record to make sure that the information is meaningful.

Interestingly, the wizard that we use to import records can't handle grid references that have any spaces in them, e.g. SO 913 451. In order to rectify the situation, we have to manually take out the blanks to allow the data import to progress. So please don't feel that you have to add blanks to make the grid reference easier to read, it's probably good for humans but bad for the computer!

I know that some devices (GPS and phone apps) will give you a grid reference figure for where you are making an observation, and some of these will give a figure with no gaps, and some will include gaps (in fact, some do both!). Please consider when you are submitting your data, removing any blanks that may creep in to help reduce the chance of an error being created when we have to change the figure with spaces incorporated within. Don't let this put you off sending location data though – we are fairly experienced at interpreting what has been submitted!

Another minor point that we see sometimes with grid references particularly for our area is that a large portion of Worcester lies within the SO 100km grid square, and on occasion we have seen grid references submitted that start off S0 (i.e. S and zero) rather than SO (S and letter O). A casual glance would not notice any difference but our ever vigilant import wizard is always on the ball and will highlight this as an error.

I don't quite know where we would be without Excel or other spreadsheets these days, they have certainly helped in recording, organising and reporting scientific information as well as the host of other uses they can be turned to. I'm sure most of you know of, and use a function called "autofill" in Excel, where by dragging the contents of a cell down (or in any direction really), the contents of the first cell is copied into the subsequent cells. This works very well for text data and can save a lot of manual typing, but for numerical data formats Excel thinks you want to incrementally increase the data as you paste the information into the destination cells. This too, is very useful, for example you can set up a range of dates, all differing by a day, or month, or whatever you choose, and also for numbers you can add an increment as you expand your worksheet. However, there is a trap, and I've seen it occur a few times with data submitted to the WBRC office. I have seen some records for species all seen at the same location but where the grid reference goes up by one digit in the last figure for each record. By using autofill, the spreadsheet has added one to the last figure rather than just copying and pasting the original grid reference into each cell. Similarly, I have also seen the dates increase by one day for

each record at the same location visit because autofill has added a day rather than paste the same date for each record on a visit.

My message here really is by all means to use the technology we now have to facilitate generating records but to exercise care when the technology almost "takes over" and does what it thinks it wants to do rather than what you really wanted it to do.

Three take home points then:
Please try to avoid incorporating spaces in grid references.
Look out for S zero rather than SO in grid references.
Beware of "autofill" doing something unexpected on your spreadsheet.

Many thanks and please keep submitting records!