

Labeling Insects

The scientific value of a specimen is dependent in large part on the accuracy and completeness of the label(s) attached to it. The appearance of a collection is also greatly influenced by the nature of the labels. In most cases two labels will be sufficient (determination and location). These labels are ideally printed on a laser printer in a nice crisp 4 point font for pinned specimens and 8 point font for fluid preserved specimens. It is not mandatory that they are computer generated, but handwritten labels should be as small as possible.

Based on preservation method two types of labels are typically needed for museum specimens: those used on dried, pinned specimens and those on fluid preserved specimens. Slightly different methods are used for preparing each of the two label types.

Locality Label

The locality label contains information pertinent to the *collection* of an insect only. This label does not contain any information about the identification of the insect. The locality label is very important and should in no way be taken lightly. Do not put off your labeling until the last minute and always write down where you collect things. An unlabeled, or worse incorrectly labeled insect is scientifically worthless!

The format of the label is as follows. The first line, containing the most general information, will have the country, state and county. The remaining lines give more specific information such as the city or town where the insect was collected (you should be as specific as possible; include lat/long or UTM when possible) and the date the insect was collected (the date should be in one of the two following formats: 12-IX-1993 or 12-Sep-1993). The day is followed by the month in roman numerals or spelled out, followed by the year. Finally the collector's name is included. The first and middle initials are fine but the last name should always be spelled out. If you acquire unlabeled specimens from some else make sure to get the locality and date from them and place their name as collector, not yours!

Below the collector, you may want to include any special information about the circumstances of the insects capture may be provided. This may be the name of the host from which it was taken in case of parasitic insects, what the insect was doing at time of capture, or the collection method (name of plant it was taken on, at uv light, Berlese funnel, etc.).

Each of the above-mentioned lines does not necessarily have to take up only one line on the label. The object is to have a label as small as possible. Therefore, if the information on one line is too long simply continue on the next line with the other data.

Create the label using a crisp font like Arial. You will often need to make a number of labels for a single locality. The easiest way to do this is to copy and paste, one after another, the original label until you have enough. Set the margins of the page to 0" all around (the word processor will automatically increase these margins to the minimum for the printer). Next use the columns feature to create multiple columns on a single page. You can usually get 10-12 columns on a single page for pinned labels and 2-3 columns for fluid labels. Set the distance between columns to 0", so that you minimize wasted space. Here are examples of locality labels for both pinned and fluid preserved specimens, along with specific settings for each

Pinned Insects

TEXAS: Blanco Co.
Pedernales Falls State Park
Pedernales River at Falls area
N31.41667° W98.26083°
6-May-2000 J.C. Abbott #691

4pt. Font
10-12 columns per page

Fluid-preserved Insects

TEXAS: Blanco Co.
Pedernales Falls State Park
Pedernales River at Falls area
N31.41667° W98.26083°
6-May-2000 J.C. Abbott #691

8pt. Font
3-4 columns per page

Determination Labels

A second label will be placed with each insect. It will contain identification information and the person's name that identified the insect and the year the identification was made. For our purposes each label will contain a minimum of Family that the insect belongs, however, put a species determination on the label if you know it. These labels should be printed using the same font size as the locality labels. Here are examples:

Order Coleoptera Family Scarabaeidae Det. J.C. Abbott 2000
--

<i>Libellula luctuosa</i> (Burm.) Det. J.C. Abbott 2000
--

Label Placement

The locality label is the top label with pinned or pointed insects. It should be dropped directly into a vial long ways with an insect preserved in alcohol. With pinned or pointed insects, the label should be about 15 mm from the bottom of the pin. The height is not critical, but whatever height you choose, remain consistent. You can use a pinning block to aid you in labeling your insects. I find the top height of most pinning blocks to be about right.

On a pinned insect, the pin should be placed so that it is centered under the insect without obliterating any letters. This way the label will help protect your pinned specimen. This label should be oriented such that the wording on the label begins at the anterior end of the insect and reads posteriorly. In other words, the lines on the label are parallel with the long axis of the insect's body (axis from head to tail), and you should be able to read the label when facing the left side of the insect.

On a pointed insect, the pin is placed through the right side of the label, about half-way between the middle and the right edge of the label. This serves to protect the specimen as well. The label is oriented with the wording being parallel to the long axis of the point, *not* the insect. The label will still be read from the left side.

Determination labels are oriented the same way as above on pinned insects and are the last label on the pin. For fluid-preserved specimens, coil the label around a pair of forceps and place it in the vial so that it wraps around the inside at the top. Ultimately, with fluid-preserved specimens, the goal is to not obstruct the view of the specimen.

Storing Insects

Any box with a tight fitting lid and a bottom in which you can stick pins will be fine. A bottom made of cork, polyethylene foam, or Styrofoam is best. Do not try to stick pins directly into a cardboard bottom as they will not stay in place, and the insects can be easily broken in the pieces.

Dead insects are desirable food for many live insects, which will go to considerable effort to destroy your collection. Ants, roaches and dermestid beetles (also known as carpet or skin beetles) are the worst culprits. It is advisable to take some sort of precaution against these pests. Always keep a tight lid on your collection. This alone, however, is seldom enough. It is a good idea to keep a few mothballs in your collection box. Be sure to anchor them down somehow - otherwise they may roll around and destroy your insects. *Also, remember that mothballs melt Styrofoam if they come into contact with it.* A perforated matchbox filled with mothballs or flakes held down with pins in the corner of your box is a good way to avoid these problems.

