Staying Safe in the Field - Panel Discussion

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About Me

- MS in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation at the University of Florida.
- Ph.D. Candidate in Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology.
- Cofounder of City Bird (www.citybird.org).
- Project Coordinator of Triangle Bird Count.
- Board member of New Hope Audubon Society.
My past and current research

- Avian aggression and audience effect
- Forest songbirds’ homing behavior
- Anthropause on urban birds
- Wealth and urban biodiversity
- Ecological legacy effects of redlining

Picture source: Oiseaux-Birds, Katie Sieving
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- Ecological legacy effects of redlining
Encountered safety issues - Vehicle Safety

Issue: car got stuck in mud or sand

Strategies:

- Avoid doing fieldwork alone when possible. A helping hand can get you out of trouble.
- Before doing fieldwork, identify university staff who can help you when you have car problems.
- Communicate frequently with your advisor about your fieldwork schedule, especially fieldwork in completely remote areas without receptions.

I got my car stuck in the mud while doing fieldwork in the summer of 2018.
Encountered safety issues - Getting Lost

Issue: got lost while doing fieldwork

Strategies:

- Keep your phone or GPS device with you all time.
- Download offline google maps beforehand to help you navigate when getting lost.
- STOP strategies
  - S (Stop) - stay calm and do not panic
  - T (Think) - think through how you got there and what landmarks you see
  - O (Observe) - if without a map, follow the stream downhill as a last resort
  - P (Plan) - think about possible plans. It’s best to stay put if it’s nightfall

The picture is from online. I got lost for about an hour at a state park in Florida while doing fieldwork in 2018.

Picture source: door county pulse
Encountered safety issues - Insect hazards

Issue: got ticks while doing fieldwork

Strategies:

● Wear long socks and pants and use insect repellent.
● Conduct regular tick checks throughout the day.
● Thoroughly check ticks when returning from the field and wash field clothes when possible.

The picture is from online. I found ticks on my clothes and body multiple times during the fieldwork season.
Encountered safety issues - Interacting with locals

Issue: interacting with local police and private property owners while doing fieldwork

Experiences:

- Being aggressively told to leave the property (golf course) when doing fieldwork for a bluebird/chickadee nest monitoring research.
- Being chased/followed while driving my research vehicle to have a conversation with two private property owners about trespassing on their property.
- Being pulled over by a police officer while collecting data for Climate Watch.

Picture source: Ken Stevens, Bellingham Herald
Encountered safety issues - Interacting with locals

Issue: interacting with local police and private property owners while doing fieldwork

Strategies:

- Inform your neighbors near your field site about you, your research, and your institution affiliations.
- Always carry credentials and permits when someone challenges why you are there.
- Wear university-affiliated clothing and use a university vehicle or magnet.
- If feeling unsafe at any time, contact your supervisor and modify the project plan when necessary.
A proposed framework to improve field safety

- Universities can customize training to be relevant to local risks.
- Field ecologists should complete training and prepare for risks in the field.
- Always document encountered dangers and report them to your supervisors.

(Rudzki et al., 2022)
Thank you!