SECTION ONE

# What is the Grinnell Method?

The Grinnell Technique was developed by Joseph Grinnell (1877-1939), a field naturalist, teacher, and the first director of the University of California's Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. Grinnell developed and published the theory of the ecological niche in 1924.

Grinnell developed a field observation method which enabled various researchers, both amateur and professional, to gather consistent high quality information. It was designed to aid scientific investigation. It is an information gathering method used by professional biologists and field naturalists. Grinnell taught the method to his students and used a variation of the system himself.

The method consists of four parts:

1. a field notebook - to directly record observations as they are happening
2. a field journal - of fully written narrative entries on observations
3. a species account - of detailed observations on chosen species
4. a catalog - records of where and when specimens were collected

It takes practice to use the system but it is well worth it. Many researchers use a modified format of the method. The format guidelines are pretty simple. I use a 3x5 card stuck in the back pocket of my moleskin field journal or written in my field notebook to remind me what to write.

The Naturalist's Field Journal: A Manual of Instruction Based on a System Established by Joseph Grinnell by Steven Herman, is the only book that I have come across that discusses the method in-depth. I wrote this guide after using the method for several years. I wanted a simpler explanation of how the method should be conducted.

In 1908, Joseph Grinnell had this to say about the method he developed,

"Our field records will be perhaps the most valuable of all our results…any and all as many (as you have time to record) items are liable to be just what will provide the information wanted. You can't tell in advance which observations will prove valuable. Do record them all!" [The "Grinnell Method", http://mvz.berkeley.edu/Grinnell_Method.html, accessed 30 December 2014]

The Grinnell Resurvey Project was started in by the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology in 2007 to resurvey the 700 sites in California and adjoining states that Grinnell and his colleagues surveyed in the early 20th century. By revisiting these sites, the Museum wanted to document changes in species distribution, population sizes, diversity and other changes to animal communities. Several areas were chosen and field biologists resurveyed the sites, took a few animal specimens, took extensive notes on the local habitats and re-photographed specific sites that Grinnell and his colleagues took in the early 20th century. The final report entitled, "The Grinnell Project: Using a Unique Historical Record to Document Responses of Mammals and Birds to 100 Years of Climate Change" was completed in 2012 and can be found at http://mvz.berkeley.edu/Grinnell/pdf/NSF-GRP_final_report.pdf.

In 2007, the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology started a project to put all of its collected field notes, maps, and photos online. This is a wonderful opportunity for naturalists all over the world, to read information and see the field notes of professional scientists.

The Museum of Vertebrate Zoology has a collection field notes of 700 bound volumes. The bound field notes are filled with photographs, maps, and drawings. I enjoyed reading the blog posts about the MVZ collection of field notes and perusing through the online collection of the scanned images of field notes, photographs, and sketches of specimens. These are interesting and inspiring to an amateur naturalist like me. It can be accessed at http://mvz.berkeley.edu/archives_index.php.

# The Field Journal


When professional naturalists and biologists use a nature journal it is called a field journal. It is where you write out your field experiences and observations in a diary-like format.

The journal entries are drawn from the notes written in the field notebook. You basically take the scribbled notes and partial sentences of your notebook and turn them into full coherent sentences. It is ideally written in the afternoon or evening of the observation. Don't let too much time past (even 24 hours) before writing. Memories fade very quickly.

The journal entry includes information gathered based on the observation checklist and what you observed. Also include explanations of how you did something, such as finding tracks and signs, or where you looked for plants and animals.