

# KNOWLEDGE BASE

## Scientists as Storytellers



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This is the sixth year for the Research and Education (R&E) Department of *Fair Chase*, launched in 2006 to help focus the magazine on B&C programs and priorities. I felt privileged to be selected as the first

R&E editor, seeing this as a golden opportunity to highlight the Club's substantial role in wildlife research and the development of future professionals. I also felt trepidation for how it might be received by our diverse readership.

You see, most wildlife scientists are terribly inept at writing for a popular audience. Trained to write for scientific journals, their articles are dry and often incomprehensible to anyone except other scientists. From college on, they are admonished to write in third-person passive voice and to strip the narrative down to the bare essentials. As Dagnet's Joe Friday used to say, "Just the facts, ma'am."

And so the scientific journal version of events might read: "The trap design was modified following mortality of three sub-adults." But the real story might go something like this: "Crikey! In our first week of trapping we managed to kill three pups in this already-stressed population. This setback had the team nearly in tears. We consulted every expert about our methods and thank goodness Old Trapper Joe showed us how to tweak the springs using pliers and baling wire."

There are good reasons for the Spartan-style used in scientific writing. The

credibility of research depends on its objectivity and its ability to be repeated by other scientists. This requires clear language that eliminates guesswork in methods used and is free of subjective interpretations about findings and results. Plus on a practical level, publishing is an expensive business and so authors are always under pressure to economize on words.

In the first R&E column published in the Fall 2006 issue, I wrote that the time was right "because research and education are so critical to wildlife conservation and there are so many stories worth telling." My aim was to engage wildlife scientists and educators—especially those working on B&C-supported projects—in sharing their stories and discoveries in ways that would interest and inform all readers of *Fair Chase*.

For authors, this required breaking the rules and writing in an entirely different way. I asked them to use first-person active voice to tell the story of their research or education project. They were advised that including personal perspectives (for example, what led them to this project, what motivates their interest in their chosen career) would help them connect with readers, as would anecdotes about the challenges and rigors of field research. I reminded them to avoid technical jargon and to explain their project's methods, results, and implications in terms that anybody could grasp. Some authors, typically the younger ones, took to popular writing like ducks to water. For others it was a real stretch, requiring a generous dose of editorial assistance.

The past five years of R&E have been very rewarding. Of all the prospective authors

I contacted to request an article, not one turned me down. A few have yet to deliver, but I'm confident they will. Oh, did I mention that except for a very few solicited articles, these authors provide their work *gratis*?

Authors often follow up with thanks for the opportunity to share their work with audiences they normally don't communicate with. And many state that writing for the B&C Club is a real honor. For some, it's a way to share the results of work supported by the Club, and for others, it's one small way to contribute to the Club's conservation legacy.

The research subjects have ranged from elk, caribou, and wolves to bears, condors, and jaguars to alien plants, wildlife diseases, and genetics. Stories about educational programs have spanned school kids to mid-career professionals. B&C Regular Members and Associates have access to all these articles at [www.boone-crockett.org](http://www.boone-crockett.org). Just go to the Associates Community, and click on the tab for *Fair Chase* Archives.

If you have a science story or ideas for future articles, don't hesitate to contact me through the *Fair Chase* staff at B&C headquarters. ■

*W. B. Kessler*

For the last six years the Knowledge Base column has been connecting wildlife scientist and research and education projects with audiences they normally don't communicate with in a way that is engaging and informative. BELOW: The first column was published in the Fall 2006 issue of *Fair Chase*.

