Verifying records imported from iNaturalist

version 1, 23 September 2021

Contents

This document is available via the iRecord verifiers' resources page. If your verification role in iRecord is linked to a specific website or survey then the iNaturalist data will not affect you, and you don't need to read this!

1. Background

iNaturalist is a global online system for collecting wildlife observations. It uses a crowd-sourcing approach to provide help with species identification, and can also suggest identifications on the basis of image-recognition from photos. Use of iNaturalist in the UK has been growing, and in April 2021 a UK portal for iNaturalist was launched:

- iNaturalist UK website
- Launch announcement on the NBN website

The NBN Trust is working with BRC and the Marine Biological Association to steer this project and make the records available more widely. In order to help this process we are importing records from iNaturalist into the iRecord data warehouse, and they are available to verifiers who wish to access them. They can be verified and downloaded in the usual way, but the main limitation is that there is no two-way communication between the systems. This means that verifications, redeterminations and comments added in iRecord are not communicated back to the recorder in iNaturalist, and for this reason we will be presenting the iNaturalist records in a separate verification page, alongside the main verification page.

If for any reason you decide that you do not wish to verify the iNaturalist records, you can simply ignore the iNaturalist verification page and just use the main verification page (which excludes the iNaturalist records). Or you can contact iRecord and ask for iNaturalist records to be excluded from your verification filter.

2. Which records are coming in to iRecord?

Records will be imported to iRecord from iNaturalist if they meet these conditions:

- They are from the UK, Isle of Man or Channel Islands
- They have taxon names that we can match to the UK Species Inventory (this may include identifications at higher taxon levels such as genus or family)
- The recorder has allocated a record licence that allows sharing (see below)
- The identification on iNaturalist has reached "research grade" status (see below)
- The photo/s associated with the record will also be displayed within iRecord, as long as the recorder has allocated a photo licence that allows sharing (if the photo has not been licensed for sharing it can still be viewed by clicking on the link to see the original record on the iNaturalist website, see below)

iNaturalist uses Creative Commons licences for its records and photos. At the moment we are only importing records that have been shared with one of these licences: CC0, CC BY (attribution) and CC BY-NC (attribution + non-commercial use only). Some iNaturalist users specify CC licences that include a "no derivatives" or "share alike" restriction, and it is not clear how such records can be used (they are not able to be accepted onto the NBN Atlas for instance), so for now we are not importing these licences.

iRecord will display photos from iNaturalist that are shared under any of the CC licences. Note that iNaturalist allows licences to be specified for records and separately for photos, so in some cases a record can be imported to iRecord but its associated photo cannot be displayed; in this case, the photo/s can be viewed by clicking on the link to see the record on the iNaturalist website.

"Research grade" is a term used by iNaturalist to indicate that the identification has been agreed by two-thirds of the people expressing an opinion. Note that this threshold can be reached if two people add the same identification, and it does not guarantee that the identification is correct.

If the identification gets changed on iNaturalist, and the new identification is agreed and reaches research grade, the record will be reimported into iRecord under the new taxon name, and will overwrite the previous version, UNLESS the record has already been verified in iRecord. Once verified in iRecord, iNaturalist records do not get overwritten, and any subsequent change in identification within iNaturalist is ignored.

3. The iNaturalist verification page

Although most of the usual verification processes can be applied to the iNaturalist records, there are some differences, and in order to make this clear we have set up a separate verification page for iNaturalist records. The standard verification page will remain unchanged, and will not display the iNaturalist records. To view any iNaturalist records that fall within your verification role you should go to the new iNaturalist verification page (linked under the "Verify" menu).

The iNaturalist verification page is very similar in layout and functionality to the main verification page. The differences are as follows.

Records grid background colour

The grid is shaded green to provide a visual reminder that you are on the iNaturalist verification page and not the main verification page.

Links to view record details

There are two links that allow you to view the details for an individual record:
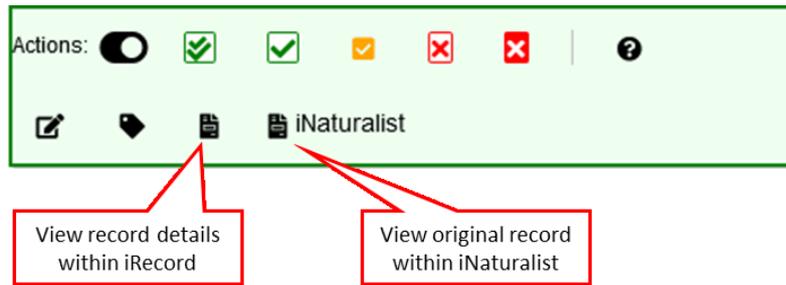
You are unlikely to need to view the record details within iRecord, but it may be helpful to view the record in iNaturalist. For instance, some iNaturalist records have photos that are not licenced for sharing and cannot be imported into iRecord, but these photos will be visible in iNaturalist. Also, if you wish to add comments that will be seen by the original recorder you may choose to do so by logging in to iNaturalist and adding comments there (see below for more on communicating with iNaturalist users).

Query button

This is available for use, but note that any queries or comments added to iNaturalist records are unlikely to be seen by the original recorder, due to the fact that there is no link between iNaturalist user accounts and iRecord user accounts.
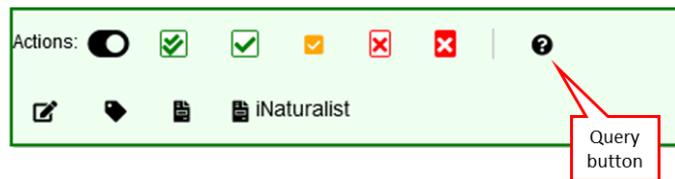
You can use the query button to put the record into the "queried" status and add a comment for your own use. You can also use the query button to send an email to the recorder, but you will only be able to do so if you already know their email address. See below for more on options for communicating with iNaturalist users.

Details pane

This shows the record details in just the same way as on the main verification page. However, note that we are not able to provide an email address for iNaturalist recorders, for technical and data protection reasons. See below for more on the options for providing feedback to iNaturalist users.

Recorder experience tab

The "Recorder experience" tab that shows how many records a recorder has previously submitted is not available for the iNaturalist records (because there is no individual iRecord user account associated with iNaturalist records).

4. Communicating with iNaturalist users

It is not currently possible for iRecord user accounts to be linked directly to iNaturalist user accounts, and there is no mechanism available for you to contact iNaturalist users from within iRecord, nor for iNaturalist users to receive notifications from iRecord.

One option for verifiers is to just accept that communications to iNaturalist recorders are not possible, and to simply verify the records without spending any time on adding comments to the verification decisions.

If you wish to communicate directly with the iNaturalist users, the only option is to register on iNaturalist and add comments to the original version of the record on there. If you log in to iNaturalist and then open the verification page on iRecord, you should find that you can use the iNaturalist record details button to open the original record in iNaturalist and quickly add a comment there before returning to iRecord.

You can redetermine the records in iRecord as usual, but if you do the redetermination is not passed back to iNaturalist. If you wish, you can add your redetermination as a new identification within iNaturalist itself, using the record details button as described above.

Note that there is no expectation or pressure on you to engage with the original recorder on iNaturalist, it is an option that you can take up if you wish.

5. Potential issues with iNaturalist observations

When we trialled an import of records from iNaturalist during 2018-19 a number of issues were found that verifiers may wish to bear in mind when assessing the records from this source.

- A small proportion of iNaturalist records were shown to contain erroneous date and location information; in at least one case this appeared to result from the date/location information having been automatically harvested by iNaturalist from the photo metadata, rather than applying to the record itself. As far as we know this affects a very small proportion of the iNaturalist records.
- For sensitive species and sites iNaturalist handles the blurring of location information in a different way to iRecord, and this can cause difficulties. If in doubt, refer to the original record on iNaturalist to see what blurring was originally applied.
- Some iNaturalist users choose not to provide their real name as the recorder name. Recording scheme verifiers will need to decide whether they can accept records with pseudonyms.
- The "research grade" category on iNaturalist can be reached by any two people agreeing the identification, assisted by the use of automated image recognition when the observation is first added to iNaturalist. This can work very well for those taxon groups where identification skills are widely shared, but it works less well for the more specialist taxa that depend on having detailed knowledge of identification features that may not always be visible from photos

BRC is working with NBN Trust to develop guidance for iNaturalist users so that they are aware of these issues and can avoid them wherever possible.

6. Downloading records

As a verifier you are able to download the record details for all the records that you are able to verify, and this will now include any iNaturalist records that fall within your species group and geographical remit. When you go to the download page and set your "Records to access" to your verification role, the iNaturalist records will be included, unless you set up a filter to exclude them.

If you wish to exclude iNaturalist records from your download you can do so by using the "Create a filter" button, and then clicking on "Source":
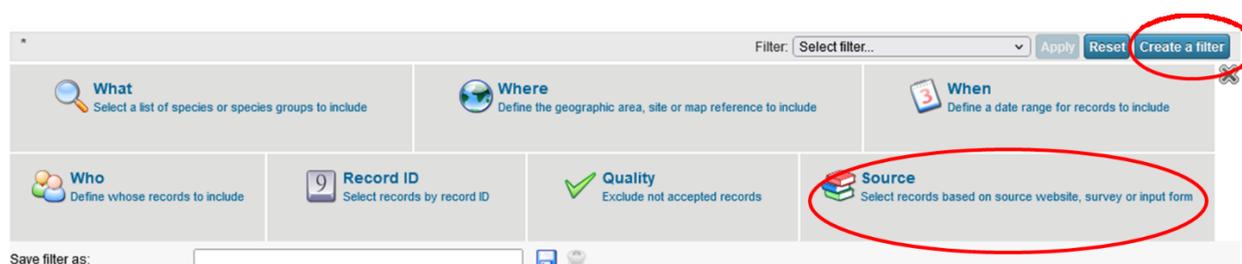
And then in the list that opens up, set the "Websites" list to "Exclude", and then tick the box for iNaturalist, and then click on "Apply":

Alternatively, if you know that you don't want to download iNaturalist records at all you can contact iRecord and ask for iNaturalist records to be excluded from your verification filter.

7. Feedback

We hope that this process will assist in making the UK iNaturalist records more widely available for those who wish to make use of them. If you have any feedback please let us know at irecord@ceh.ac.uk.

iRecord is operated by the Biological Records Centre (BRC) as part of the work of the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH). BRC, established in 1964, is a national focus in the UK for terrestrial and freshwater species recording. BRC works closely with the voluntary recording community, principally through support of National Recording Schemes and Societies (as listed on the BRC website).

This document has been written by Martin Harvey with input from David Roy and John van Breda.