

KNIVES: FIELDWORK WARNING

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Background

The law in the UK on carrying knives has been tightened in recent years and the police have increased their vigilance in response to recent well-publicized instances of serious crime involving these weapons. BLS members have expressed concern over the possible illegality of carrying knives to collect samples in the field.

Current law makes it **illegal** to carry any knife with a blade exceeding 3" or 7.5cm (as well as many other sharp objects), in a public place **without good reason**. However, possession of folding knives with blades smaller than these dimensions (such as many "Swiss Army" type knives) is considered to be acceptable. The website http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CrimeJusticeAndTheLaw/Typesofcrime/DG_181675 provides basic rules on knives and these are abstracted here (as of the time of writing).

Basic rules on knives

If you're planning to buy or carry a knife, it's important to know the rules. Anyone found breaking these laws can face up to four years in prison.

These include:

- it is a crime to carry a knife in public without good reason – for example, if you work as a chef
- knives with folding blades, like Swiss Army knives, are not illegal as long as the blade is three inches long (7.62 cm) or less
- if any knife is used in a threatening way (even a legal knife, such as a Swiss Army knife), it is regarded as an 'offensive weapon' by the law
- any sharp instrument – even a screwdriver – can be viewed by the police as an illegal offensive weapon if you do not have a good reason for carrying it
- the maximum penalty for an adult carrying a knife is four years in prison and a fine of £5000
- it is illegal to carry, buy or sell any type of knife banned by the government (the list of banned knives is given on the Government website)
- it is illegal for any shop to sell a knife of any kind (including cutlery and kitchen knives) to anyone under the age of 18

Very similar laws, with some variations apply in Scotland.

The website <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/07/05130225/4> provides details.

Recommendations

The BLS considers that the use of knives and sharp instruments (such as chisels or secateurs) for the collection of lichens constitutes a good reason to carry such tools in public.

When lichen collecting using a knife or other sharp instrument the following is recommended:

- When collecting be able to demonstrate that your activities give you 'good reason' to carry a knife. e.g. being part of an organised activity (such as a BLS Field Meeting); being able to show a copy of written permission to collect; and look the part of a lichenologist with your hand-lenses, packets, field guides etc. Be especially cautious when collecting in populated areas.
- Do not carry your knife or sharp instrument openly on your person, keep it in a rucksack or bag until it is needed for use; similarly if in a car store any knife or sharp instrument so that it is not immediately to hand.
- Consider the potential hazards of using a penknife of the folding type and the real danger of severe cuts to fingers – especially if a folding knife is pushed forward (towards the point) to prise samples from the substrate. Note: some penknives have folding blades with a locking button that needs to be pressed in order that the blade can be stowed. Be aware that these are not considered to be folding blades and thus do not fall within the category of acceptable knives even if the blade is less than 3" long.
- If working with schools or prisons different and tighter laws may apply and it is recommend that advice is taken from the establishment concerned.