



Nature Journaling

May 30, 2020 • Laura M Gillis
Texas Master Naturalist, Rolling Plains Chapter

“Wander around and gather fond memories.”

– Robert Bateman, Wildlife Artist

Welcome to Nature Journaling! I hope this class will inspire you to go outside, observe and record the wonderful world of nature!

– Laura

Journals - Materials & Methods

Journaling is one of the oldest method of recording changes and events in the world.

Explorers, naturalists, scientists, ship captains and plain ol' regular people keep journals. A few notable people who kept journals were Lewis & Clark, Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, Thomas Jefferson and Beatrix Potter.

Some types of journals that you can keep include scientific, nature, daily or specific themes like insects or a special travels.

Benefits of Journaling

- **Journaling and drawing will help you slow down and observe.** You will focus and note details like shape, texture, spacial relationships.
- **You will notice more and remember the subject better.** When you look back at your sketch, you will often remember what it was like to be there, the sights, sounds and even smells.
- **It's a way to document animals/plants/feathers that you are not allowed to collect or keep.**
- **No worries about electronics.** No batteries, chargers, WiFi or internet is needed!
- **You can sketch anywhere and all you need is a pencil or pen and paper.** Don't start with anything too fancy or expensive. Experiment with papers, pencils, markers or paints.

The journal is just for you.

It can be neat or messy. Finished or not. You can draw or write, use your favorite quotes, calligraphy, color, poetry, collage or photography.... anything goes! Most of all, have FUN and enjoy!

Tools & Equipment: *Keep your kit simple and light.*

Basic:

- **Unlined journal** with heavy weight paper (mixed media or watercolor paper) your choice of size but no smaller than 5x7 no larger than 8.5 x 11. Journals come in all shapes and sizes with all kinds of paper.... don't buy something that is so expensive that you will be afraid to write or sketch in it!
- **Pens** - waterproof (Micron is a good pen) and a not waterproof (gel ink pen)
- **Pencils** - mechanical or regular pencils with #2 lead. (If you bring a wooden pencil, please bring a sharpener that can catch and contain the shavings.)
- **Brush pen** loaded with water (or brushes & water container)

Optional Supplies:

- watercolor paints
- watercolor pencils
- colored pencils
- brush pens (with ink and/or water)
- paper towels/rags
- clips to control journal pages in the wind
- backpack or tote (for all your supplies)
- lightweight chair, stool or blanket to sit on
- zip top baggies (for trash and/or treasures)
- Hat for shade

Optional Gear:

- binoculars
- magnifying glass
- field guides

Before you go... Buy the best supplies you can afford and know your materials. Practice and play on a page in the back of your journal. Know what your paper can take and which pens are waterproof and which ones are not.

Some Nature Journaling “Rules”

- **Leave no trace.** Pick up all your trash and carry out dirty water if you are painting.
- **Do not disturb the wildlife or your subject.**
- **Check the weather** and be prepared.
- **Be observant and pay attention** to where you sit to sketch.
- Bird nests, eggs and most feathers are protected and it is illegal to have these in your possession. So, do a drawing, make some notes and leave the specimen where you found it.
- Leave flowers and plants where they are and draw them in their environment. Some can be poisonous or have stickers and thorns. (For example, Poison Ivy can make you itch even in winter with no leaves on the vine!) Draw the flowers, leaves and stems. Document how and where they are growing.
- If your subject will fit on your page, draw it at actual size. If it is large, scale it down and take measurements to aid in identification. If your subject is very small, you may want to draw it larger but make a notation about the actual size. You can estimate the size by comparing it to something. (A dollar bill is slightly over 6”. A quarter is 1” and a dime is .75”.) A paper ruler glued in the back of your journal can also come in handy.
- Label what you know on your sketch. For example, when sketching birds or bugs, note sizes, colors, markings on wings and around eyes.

Getting Started

Find something that interests you and look for a comfortable place to sit or stand. Check for ants, snakes, stickers and scat!

Relax and get comfortable. Open your journal and get your pen ready. Set a timer if you need to. Be quiet and still. Once you are sketching, and you get in that “Zone”, time will fly by without you even noticing. Setting a timer allows you to watch your subject and not the clock. It will also keep you out of trouble with the folks back at home who are waiting on you for supper! If you run out of time, take a quick reference photo so you can finish your sketch later.

Ask yourself some questions...

How do you feel in this place? Make a note of the date, place and of your first impressions - weather, temperature, sights, sounds, smells. Feel the air.

What do you see that interests you? Are you looking at the big picture and sketching a landscape? Or are you starting with something smaller like a bird, a flower or a bug? Look at the light.

What is your subject doing?

How did your subject get here?

How does your subject fit into the environment?

Then, clear your mind and quickly draw what you SEE and not what you THINK you see. Make some notes recording size, color, or actions taken by your subject.

Drawing Tips:

Landscapes: For me, a landscape is the most daunting of all the sketches. Squinting your eyes and making things a little blurry will help simplify the scene so you can see simple shapes. Start with blocking in the big things first and then fill in the details.

Small Animals & Birds: Animals and birds will move, flutter and flit around making sketching a challenge. Sketch quickly and try to get the basic shape down first. When the subject moves, start another sketch. When it returns to a position, go back to that earlier sketch. You will soon have a page full of poses! Bird feeders are good places to practice sketching birds. Note wing colors and markings on your page to help identify the species later.

Wildlife: Wildlife will rarely sit still for a portrait. Make sure that you don't disturb the wildlife and that you are in a safe position while you sketch quickly. Zoos are good places to practice live animal sketching and many natural history museums will let you sketch their exhibits. I like to draw my pets and for the most part, they are pretty cooperative... I have sketchbooks full of napping dogs and cats.

Shadows: When you are sketching outside, shadows can move and change quickly. Try to get your basic sketch and notes down before the shadows move or you lose the light. Look for colors reflected in the shadows.

Editing: You don't have to draw everything you see! Feel free to edit your scene and take out telephone poles and things you don't like. However, *don't* draw what you *don't* see! If you can't see the duck's feet, don't try to fake it... stick with what you can *see*.

Sketching with others: Sometimes, you just won't be able to sketch and take your time. If you are with a group of non-sketchers, ask for a five or ten minute break. Sketch quickly to get the essence of your subject and take a reference photo so you can finish the sketch later. Just a few quick strokes will help you remember the scene and will give your sketch an energy that you won't get from the photo.

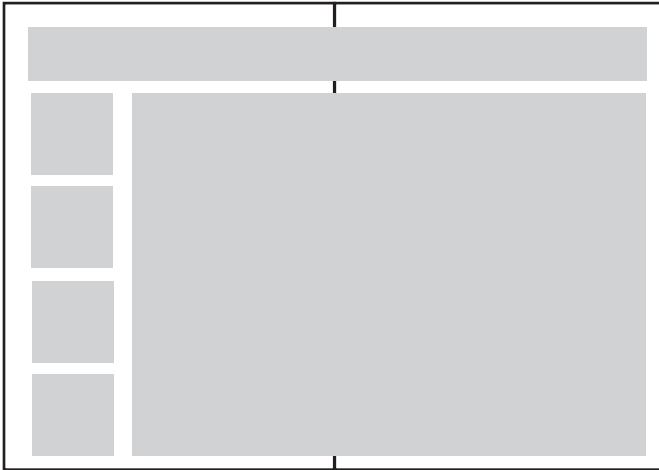
Page Layouts

There is NO set way to layout your journal page. It is up to you!

Mixing portrait and landscape pages can add interest to the journal. Add calligraphy, stamps and borders to your pages too.



*Single Page
Portrait*



Double Page Spread



*Single Page
Landscape*

Sketching Prompts

On days when you just don't know where to begin, here are a few ideas to get you started. Try one or more of these prompts and you will be filling journal pages before you know it!

If you can't go outside...

- Set up by a window and sketch your bird feeder
- Dogs, cats, and pets make good subjects
- Houseplants
- Sketch from a nature documentary on TV.
(An added bonus of being able to pause your subject.)
- Go to the zoo or a natural history museum

When you're outside but don't know where to start....

Make a grid. Divide your page and then fill the spaces with....
Patterns • Leaves • Bugs • Flowers

Draw the same object from different angles. If your subject is a flower bloom, draw that bloom from the front, side and back. Draw the leaves and the whole plant.

Make a sound map. Sit in one place and just listen. Place a mark in the center of the page that represents you and then document what you hear and where it is around you.

Make an event map. As you walk through a meadow, your garden, or on the trail, make a map as you go documenting what you see and hear along the way.

Do an area study. Pick a small area in your yard or garden. (Think hula hoop size or smaller.) Observe everything inside that hula hoop... grasses, flowers, weeds, insects, dirt. It is amazing what you might find!

Curiosity Chain. Write and/or draw observations while asking questions. What do you notice? Do you wonder about it? What does it remind you of? How did it get here? Why is it here? Is it beneficial?

Finally, if you just can't seem to draw it... write about it.
Describe what you are seeing or what is difficult to draw. Write a poem, a paragraph or a list of observations.

Final thoughts on journals and materials.

I have said to buy the best supplies you can afford but if there was one place I would splurge, that would be on the journal. You can get crazy expensive on journals but all you really need is one with good, heavy weight paper that will stand up to rough treatment.

Look for journals with Mixed Media, Bristol or Watercolor paper. Some of the expensive handmade papers will have a rough texture making it hard to draw on and will literally fall apart if you try to erase a line. They can be tricky when it comes to painting too.

Journals come in all sizes with soft or hard covers, spiral or book bindings, portrait, landscape and square formats. Experiment and find what you like best.

Some of my favorite sketchbooks are:

Stillman & Birn, Beta Series

Hand•book Journal Co.

Moleskine, watercolor

Strathmore Mixed Media

* * * * *

Thanks so much for coming on our
“virtual nature journal hike”!

Now, grab your journal, a pen and a hiking buddy
and go out and do some nature journaling!

Special thanks to **Lynn Seman** for helping me get this done!

Questions or comments? Please let me know!

Laura M Gillis

email: laura@YellowCatArt.com

Blog: YellowCatArt.blogspot.com

Facebook, Twitter & Instagram: YellowCatArt

Resources

Below are a few of my favorite websites and books. Try not to spend too much time on the internet or with your nose in a book. **The best way to learn is to go outside and practice, practice, practice!**

A few of my favorite websites: (*not all of these are nature sketchers*)

John Muir Laws	johnmuirlaws.com
Jean McKay	jeanmackayart.com
Cathy Johnson	cathyjohnsonart.blogspot.com
Nature Sketchers	naturesketchers.blogspot.com
Shari Blaukopf	shariblaukopf.com
Danny Gregory	dannygregorysblog.com

Some of my favorite nature sketching books!

The Art of Field Sketching, by Clare Walker Leslie

Nature Drawing, A Tool For Learning, by Clare Walker Leslie

Nature Journaling, Learning to Observe and Connect with the World Around You” by Clare Walker Leslie & Charles E. Roth

Drawing Nature, by Stanley Maltzman

A Trail Through Leaves, by Hannah Hinchman

The Laws Guide to Drawing Birds, by John Muir Laws

The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling
by John Muir Laws

The Sierra Club Guide To Sketching In Nature, by Cathy Johnson

Creating Nature in Watercolor: An Artist’s Guide, by Cathy Johnson

How to Keep A Sketchbook Journal, by Claudia Nice

Janet Marsh’s Nature Diary, by Janet Marsh

Vanishing Flora, by Dugald Stermer

Birds & Bees, A Sexual Study, by Dugald Stermer

Nature’s Sketchbook, and *The Wonder of Birds*, by Marjolein Bastin

And, finally, anything and everything by Beatrix Potter!

My favorite nature poet is Mary Oliver

Nature Journal Sketches & Notes:

