

Field Journaling

The field journal is the ultimate naturalist tool. It allows you to record observations, explore and study environments, maintain memories, document natural history events, and be present in the current moment. Keeping a field journal may inspire you to crawl on your hands and knees on the forest floor, scoping the tiny world below with a hand lens. Or you may discover your artistic abilities as you take in the world around you.

Through this course, you will have an opportunity to explore several different methods of field journaling. By the end of the course, you will have a collage of different types of journal entries, detailing your discoveries, new insights, fleeting thoughts, and how to identify specific species. We hope you will continue to journal after the class has ended!



Hands-on experience at the critical time, not systematic knowledge, is what counts in the making of a naturalist. Better to be an untutored savage for a while, not to know the names or anatomical detail. Better to spend stretches of time just searching and dreaming.

-- Edward O. Wilson, *Naturalist*

Journaling methods:

Free-write:

Explore the bounties of your pen by setting it to paper and writing. Free-writing allows you to truly explore your current thoughts and feelings about where you are or what you are seeing. Some people find that the descriptions they write during free-write sessions provide better memories and pictures of an area than the photographs they take. If you are not sure how to start, you may find it useful to use a starter phrase such as "I see..." or "I noticed..." or "All around me is...". Try not to pick up your pen as you write, but just let it flow without concern for syntax, spelling, or transition sentences.

Free-writing is exactly that: it's short, spontaneous, easy, ungraded, and disposable. The rules are quite simple: you write for a set time (three to five minutes) on anything that comes into your head. You can't stop to think, you can't correct anything, and you must use complete sentences. If you get stuck, write about feeling stuck; anything goes, as long as you keep writing.

Three useful maxims:

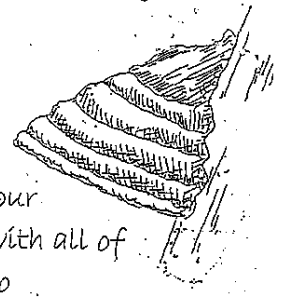
- *The secret of writing is to write. (Because you must start at all costs.)*
- *Don't get it right; get it written. (Because the editor should get involved later.)*
- *Inspiration is bunk. (Because imagination always works, all of the time.)*

-- John Talmadge, *Into the Field*

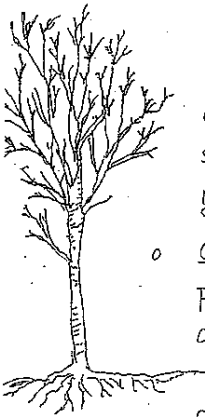


Field Sketching: (by Claire Emery)

Drawing and writing complement each other. Use sketching as a way to hone your observational skills, not as a reason to judge yourself as an artist. Experiment with all of the following techniques. Each, used consistently, will strengthen your ability to accurately observe and record the living world. Remember, draw what interests you. Be patient; it takes 2000 mistakes to learn how to draw. (The below exercises are after those described in *Nature Journaling* by Clare Walker Leslie).



- o Memory Sketch: Clear your mind of other thoughts. Then, look at your subject with total concentration. Feel its edges, textures, size, shape. Consider where it came from and how its shape was designed to function best. Memorize its key features, and after five minutes of study, draw it from memory. Whenever you have the choice to draw or to watch a critter, always watch. You can draw after it disappears. Keep to a single line drawing. You will be amazed how quickly you will develop this skill if you use it often.
- o Contour Sketch: Position your journal so you will not be tempted to look at your paper. You will do this drawing while looking *only* at your subject. Look at your object for at least three minutes before beginning, then place your pencil on the paper at the same point that your eye is looking on the object's surface. Imagine your eye is an ant crawling slowly over the whole shape. Using a careful and a continuous line, draw the wanderings of your ant as your eye wanders methodically over the contours of your subject. Do NOT lift your pencil from the paper, or you will be lost. Draw slowly and surely. This mode of drawing builds hand-eye coordination and often captures the essence of your subject better than a long detailed drawing would. Use contour sketching to loosen you up at the beginning of a drawing, or in the middle of a drawing if you get stuck.
- o Modified Contour: Use the same approach as above, except look down at your paper 20% of the time when you need to verify a connection point or a length. For 80% of the time, trust your hand-eye connection and do not look at your paper. Look at your subject! This is a great approach for field sketching.
- o Gesture Sketch: Take no more than twenty seconds to sketch your subject. Your goal is to record the whole shape of your subject and its key features quickly and ACCURATELY. Fast, continuous flowing lines are used, and no erasing. Lines are placed over lines. Gesture sketches are often used to warm up at the beginning of a longer drawing, or to record the fleeting movement of an animal. When doing a gesture sketch, hold your pen very loosely and keep your hand and eye moving quickly over the whole shape of your subject. Your eye should jot quickly back and forth between your subject and the paper. Draw your subject several times in this way from many points of view.



- o Diagrammatic Drawing: This drawing will record what you have learned so far about your subject in a simple, straightforward way, much like the line drawing that you see in field guides. Your principle goal here is to record the key features of your plant or animal or place for the purpose of identification. Drawing technique is less important than scientific accuracy. Begin with a light sketch in pencil of the whole form, then fill in the details. When the drawing is finished, write down three or four key features that help to identify the subject. Record at least one question you have about its form or function that you would like to know more about.
- o Detail Drawing: After warming up with several of the above techniques, draw your subject carefully and slowly, beginning first with the overall shape of your subject, and then adding details, shading, color, texture. After completion, take a few notes on what works in your drawing and what could be better. This will help you develop your eye as an artist. Remember what the old ones say: it takes 2000 mistakes to learn how to draw. So let's keep making them!



In this 20th century, to stop rushing around, to sit quietly on the grass, to switch off the world and come back to the earth, to allow the eye to see a willow, a bush, a cloud, a leaf... I have learned that what I have not drawn I have never really seen.

-- Frederick Franck, *The Zen of Seeing*

Haiku, Renga, and Other Poetry:

Writing Haiku can be a superb way to capture the moment. Haiku is traditional Japanese poetry, usually in the form of 3 unrhyming lines and 17 syllables, arranged into lines of 5, 7, and 5. It is often contemplative, recording nature's sounds, sights, and surprises. Articles and pronouns (such as the, he, etc.) may be missing; adverbs are seldom used, keeping the poem simple. Haiku characterizes what the writer sees or hears, but usually not abstract thoughts that are not related to the present moment.

Old pond...

*a frog leaps in
water's sound*

-- Matsuo Basho (1644-1694).

In all this cool

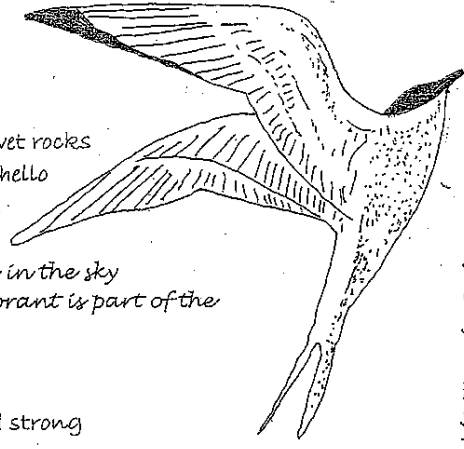
is the moon also sleeping?

There, in the pool?

-- Ryusui. (1691-1758).



Renga is linked verse, where two lines of seven syllables sew together the lines of Haiku. Often Renga utilizes subtle humor, with surprising twists or puns in the interweaving lines of seven. Many find that creating Renga opens them to new ways of perceiving the world around them, as well as engaging with the environment and others in their group. A group of two to three naturalists can create and experience a moment together by passing a journal between them, taking turns writing verse. Once you begin, you may find it is quite addictive!



White Capped waves wet rocks
Dancing palms wave hello
Gentle motion soothes

Bubbles spray colors in the sky
Sharp beak of cormorant is part of the
horizon

Pages of time past
The beds of rock stand strong
Ocean wins in time

Intense energy
Challenges Franciscan folds
Spilling water has the final say

Today she sings a gentle lullaby
Her moods as many as the colors blue

Mesmerizing sand
Orange-billed bird and floating kelp
All make the rhythm

Surfers of the skies
Catch the breaking of large waves
Smile pelican smile

Flock of sandpipers
Striped wings fly with waves
Their watery flight part of the dance

Pull of moon presides
Over intensity of tides
Watch out they cry - fly!

Laughing children
Remind us that the spell can
continue another day

The field journal is an excellent place to explore your hand at other types of poetry. While observing the natural environment, descriptive words may pass through your mind. Jot them down as they flow and you may find they string together phrases that characterize your feelings and observations in lyrical prose.

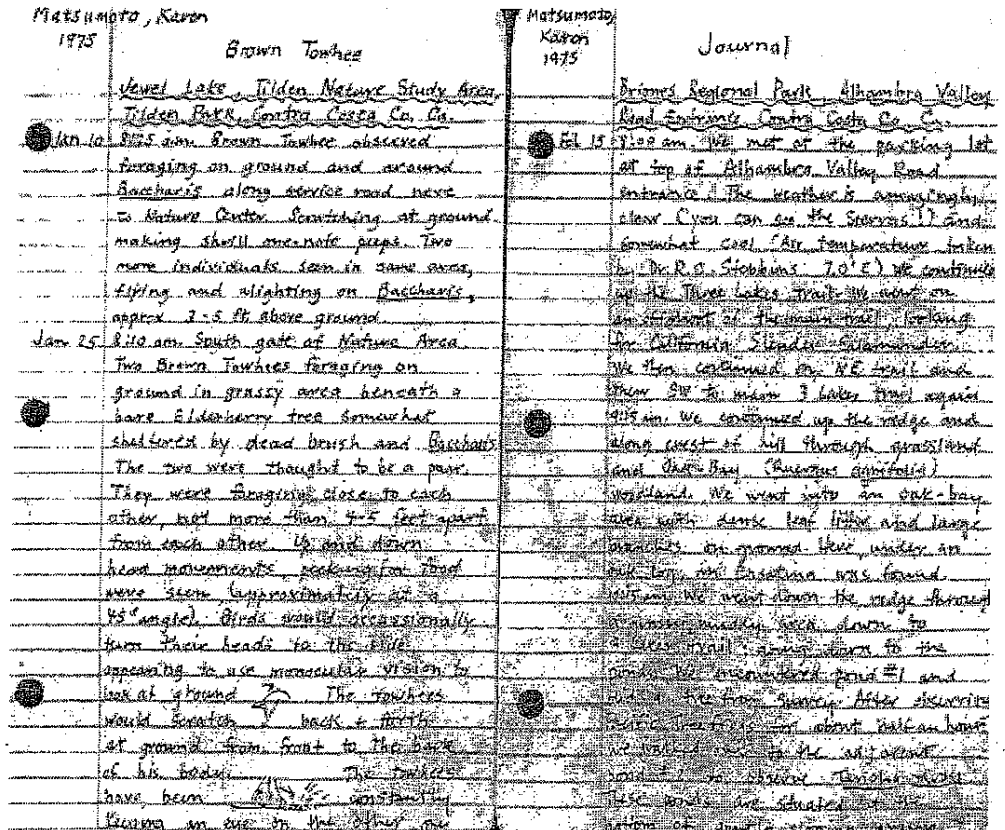
Everywhere the world is alive, awaiting exploration by those who prefer, if only at intervals, real reality to virtual reality.

-- Edward O. Wilson, foreword to *Keeping a Nature Journal*

Grinnell (Descriptive):

The Grinnell method is used widely by biologists and includes rigorous attention to detail. Daily accounts of observations are logged in a specific format. Formal field descriptions are supplemented with information from field guides, personal sketches, and a running species account. Careful and attentive note taking is an indispensable tool for those studying the natural history of an area.

Introduction to Field Journaling



Naturalist Log:

You can keep a day by day account of new species and events you find as you explore a new area. A naturalist log can be a great future reference for recalling habitats and ranges of certain species. In addition to a species list, a naturalist log might include intriguing finds such as a bird nest, an animal den, a particularly interesting tree, a sea otter latrine, etc.

Orienting information:

Regardless of the method you choose, you will find it useful if you accompany each entry with specific orienting information. This information will include your location, the date, the time of day, current weather conditions, and temperature. A brief description of the type of environment (e.g. boreal forest, open shrublands, beach) and whether or not the area has experienced much human disturbance is also very useful.

Resources:

Herman, Steven G. 1986. *The Naturalist's Field Journal: A manual of instruction based on a system established by Joseph Grinnell.* Vermillion, SD: Buteo Books.

Hinchman, Hannah 1997. *A Trail Through Leaves.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Johnson, Cathy 1991. *The Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature.* Sierra Club Books.

Leslie, Clare Walker and Charles E. Roth 2000. *Keeping a Nature Journal.* Pownal, VT. Storey Books.

Leslie, Clare Walker and John Talmadge 1999. *Into the Field, A Guide to Locally Focused Teaching.* The Orion Society.

Leslie, Clare Walker 1995. *The Art of Field Sketching.* Kendall Hunt Publishing.

You do not have to be an experienced draftsman or scientist to enjoy drawing and observing nature. All that is needed are time, curiosity, some drawing skills, and ability to look and a true desire to learn from nature.

-- Clare Walker Leslie

Drawing is the discipline by which I constantly rediscover the world.

-- Frederick Franck

