

NATURE JOURNALING – DOCUMENTING DISCOVERY

By C. T. Ward, Frederick County Master Gardeners, July, 2024

How/when/where do you experience nature? What are your souvenirs—a seashell, a pinecone, a pebble, or...a memory?

One way we can mindfully appreciate nature without taking “souvenirs” of things even as insignificant as a single pinecone, is to adapt a centuries-old tradition that challenges our scientific minds and cultivates our artistic talents and appreciation: Nature journaling.

What is nature journaling?

Best stated on the JohnMuirLaws.com website, a nature journal is an illustrated, observational journal where the user provides “a lens that focuses our attention and crystalizes our observations, thoughts, and experiences.” In other words, the journal user actually documents his/her experiences in nature by taking notes and making sketches or photographs, either on site or later.

What do I need to get started?

Start with your favorite writing utensil and a journal or notebook, anything from a special journal and art supplies to loose-leaf papers, to a three-ring notebook. You might even sketch your initial ideas on scratch paper, then transfer your final vision into the dedicated journal.

I’m not a good artist...

Don’t worry! Artistic skill is just that, a skill, built up through practice. Every person has a unique way of journaling and creating artwork. You’ll be surprised at how your own work will evolve over time. But most importantly, you should approach nature journaling as a relaxing and fun activity.

Is this appropriate for my family to do together?

Absolutely! No matter the age, everyone can participate in nature journaling. Whether everyone gets individual journals or the family shares one, nature journaling encourages creativity and healthy curiosity. It can be used to document seasonal changes; to note travel activities; or to encourage children to explore and learn about the environment, biology, geology, and other STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) areas of study. And it can be a wonderful conversation tool, enabling the group to compare what each thought was interesting or memorable about a shared outing.

Can I add natural elements to my nature journal?

Yes, but please be cautious. Be mindful of local laws and respect the rules in gardens and nature centers as you look at their exhibits. For example, it is illegal to gather the feathers of many threatened bird species, according to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, enacted to protect native North American birds that were nearly hunted to extinction at that time. The Wild Wonder

Foundation website (wildwonder.org) offers many suggestions for using your nature journal, whether as an educational tool or something more personal.

What if I don't have enough time to finish my journal entry while exploring?

If you prefer to be inspired by finding something unexpected on your nature exploration, plan flexibility into your time outdoors so you can document it at the time you notice it. However, not having enough time to sketch something or organize your thoughts in your journal is common.

To save time, before you go, plan ahead and decide what you specifically want to focus on; take photos for later reference; and write notes on what you want to highlight in your journal entry. This allows you to focus on your subject and to manage your time better.

Whether you are a beginner or a seasoned participant, nature journaling is an optimal choice for you to explore the world around you. If you are looking for inspiration, numerous educational resources on the Internet, from wildlife nonprofits to universities, highlight the benefits of nature journaling and offer tested tips and ideas. Instead of wondering “what if,” take the risk of trying something new and testing your ability to expand past what you know and what you are good at.

This wonderful planet we live on has marvelous things to show us and beckons us to partake in them. And we still can partake and not cause harm by means of nature journaling. So put down your phone and tuck those wallets away. We don't need more knick-knacks. What we need are experiences that will always be with us and the knowledge we gathered from those experiences.



Some nature journalists take detailed notes while on a nature walk, and then add those details to a journal after they get home. “A Nature Journal Story,” Jules Woolford, artist and author, *Nature Journaling Week*, 2020.

Nature journaling can be focused on one topic, such as flowers, or may cover a number of topics—making more generalized observations, such as noting insects, leaf formations and colors, and even the direction of the sun in relation to the plants and other creatures being observed. “Nature Journaling,” Elmwood Park Zoo, artist Jack Hobe.





Some nature journalists use detailed descriptions and date their entries, noticing and recording things such as where they are, people they meet or visit, creatures they see, weather, and other natural details. In the picture above, Alex Boone combines his detailed notes with even more detailed renderings of the mushrooms he saw on a 2024 trip.

Whether children or adults, many individuals can have a positive experience observing details of a simple, common plant like a dandelion. A nature journalist might want to describe the dandelion, its location, any insects he/she would see on the dandelion, and other details. (Photo by Maria Coryell Martin, University Child Development School 2024)



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