

# Sketch, Explore

Keep a nature journal to record the wild world and your reactions to it—and do it your way.

**DO YOU LIKE TO EXPLORE?** Draw? Ask questions? Imagine? Share?

If you like any of these things, then you may enjoy keeping a nature journal.

From ancient times until today, people have recorded what's happening in the natural world around them. Some want to keep track of events from day to day and place to place to discover patterns across time and space. Some want to capture the complexity of a leaf, an insect, a pebble. Some want to keep a record of a particular day or a particular location. Some just want to give their heart a chance to sing on paper!

A nature journal can help you become a better observer. It can help you understand nature—and to understand yourself and your place in the world.





## The Basics

Some nature journalers use notebooks made just for the purpose, and they buy fancy pens and paints. But you can get by just fine with supplies you most likely already have at home or school.

### What You Need

**Something to write on.** A notebook with no lines is ideal—but a regular school notebook or even a dozen pieces of paper stapled together will do. A folder or clipboard can make your notebook easy to use and help it survive getting rained on, being dropped, or other adventures it might have while outdoors with you! If you'd like, you can customize your book with your name, illustrations, even a photo of yourself in a favorite outdoors place.

**Something to write with.** A plain pencil works great. If you'd like, add colored pencils, crayons, or watercolors to your kit.

### What You Might Want

**Magnifying glass.** To see tiny things, or tiny details on big things.

**Binoculars.** To see faraway things up close or watch a bird or other animal without startling it.

**Tweezers.** To hold a small object while you study it closely.

**Ruler.** To measure the size of things you observe.





## Get Out There

The first step in keeping a nature journal is literally a step—out the door and into nature. Go for a walk or a hike anywhere there are plants and animals to observe. There's no need to find a forest or prairie or wild place. Your own yard will work just fine for starters!

Write down the date and the time of day, the weather, and a description of your location.

Look up, down, and all around. Pay attention to your senses: What do you see, hear, feel, smell? You might even want to close your eyes, while staying in place, to give your ears, nose, and sense of touch a chance to get your attention.

Nature journaling is a great way to build your ability to observe and describe things.

One way to record your observations is to use adjectives (pale green, scratchy) and measurements (3 inches in diameter). Another way is to compare things with something familiar, such as your thumb or an orange or toothbrush bristles.

Record not only what you observe, but also what you're feeling, thinking, imagining, and wondering about.

Things you might include in your journal:

- ☞ The date, time, and location of your observations.
- ☞ The time of year and weather.
- ☞ Descriptions and/or drawings of what you see, hear, smell, feel.
- ☞ Your thoughts about what you're observing.



## Stay Safe

- ☞ Let someone know where you're going and when you'll be back.
- ☞ Pay attention to where you are so you can find your way back.
- ☞ Don't taste things.

- ☞ Be careful what you touch. Some things in nature, such as poison ivy, nettles, and stinging insects, can hurt you if you're not careful.
- ☞ Check your body for ticks when you get back to home or school.



## Observe, Ponder, Repeat

The most important part of nature journaling is doing whatever you want to do! But here are some things you might want to try.

**Look for Patterns.** What do you see that has vertical lines? Spots? What comes in clusters of three or five?

**Compare and Contrast.** How is the toad you're looking at like the rock it's sitting on? How is it different?

**Bring Out Your Inner Artist.** Sketch what you see. Don't worry how it turns out—it's the trying that's the important part! The more you sketch, the better you'll get.

**Make a Sound Map.** Find a comfortable place to sit. Put an X in the middle of a fresh page in your notebook—that's you. Close your eyes and listen for sounds. Are they high or low? Melodic or mechanical? Near or far away from you? As you hear different sounds, open your eyes for a moment to record

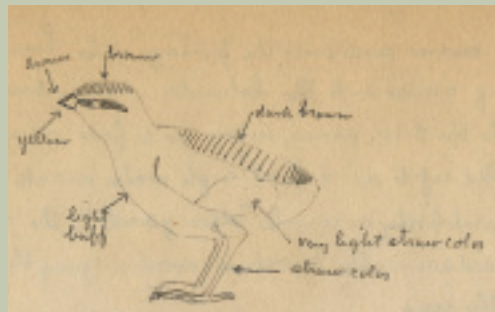
the sound on your page, using the distance from the X to indicate location and direction. Include a short notation to help you remember the sound (*bzzzzz*, *squeeeak*, *tukatukatuka*, etc.). Use the size of the lettering to indicate the size of the sound.

## Famous Nature Journalers

**Aldo Leopold** was a naturalist and writer from Wisconsin. As a child in the early 1900s, he kept a record of flowers, birds, and other animals he would see on his hikes through fields and forests.

Aldo Leopold drew a young partridge in a journal on a trip to Quetico Provincial Park in 1924.

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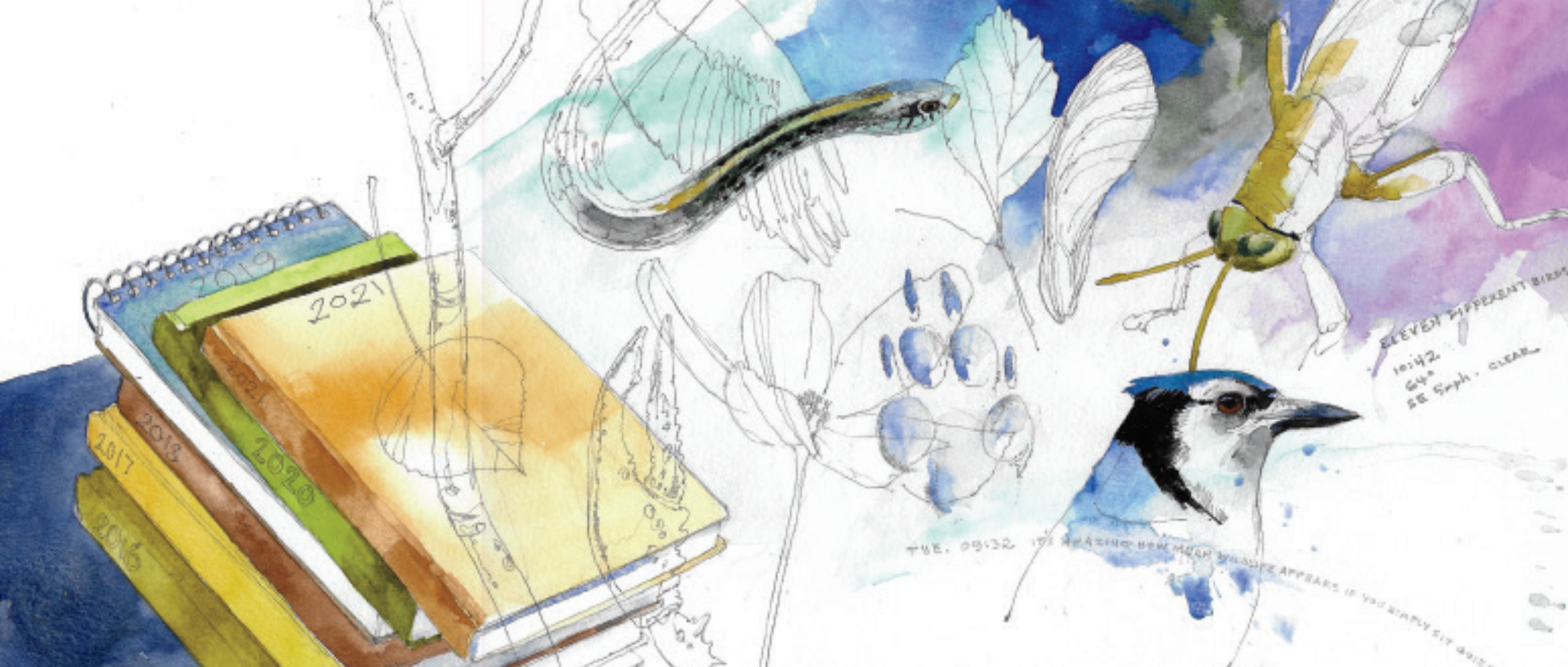
**Edith Holden** was an artist and teacher who lived in Great Britain in the early 1900s. Her nature journal of observations during all four seasons in 1906 was published 70 years later under the title *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*. It has sold millions of copies around the world.

Edith Holden depicted English winter berries in her nature journal in 1906.

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**Time Travel.** Visit the same place on different days or at different times of the day or year. What has changed? What has stayed the same? Why? Note the dates of seasonal events, or *phenology*: the first snowflake, the first frog croak in spring,

the first wild strawberry. It will be fun to compare the dates from year to year.

**Make a List.** Keep running lists on separate pages of birds, flowers, insects, etc., that you see.

**Capture Texture.** Place a textured object such as tree bark or a leaf under a page of your notebook. Scribble over the paper with the side of your pencil point or an unwrapped crayon to make a rubbing of the texture underneath.

**Wax Poetic.** Write a poem that captures the world around you and your feelings about it. You can use a standard form like haiku or acrostic, or make up your own structure.

**Go on a Color Hunt.** Choose a color and record every time you see it.

**Ask Questions.** Write down questions that your observations bring to mind. Why is the sky more blue in the west than in the east? What are those fuzzy things floating through the air? Why does an ant wave its antennae in the air? Think about how you might find an answer—by looking it up, asking an expert, doing an experiment, or just figuring it out.

**Charles Darwin** was a naturalist who traveled the world in the early 1800s. The observations of geology, plants, and animals he recorded in his journals became the foundation for his theory of evolution and natural selection.

Darwin sketched his first diagram of an evolutionary tree in a notebook in 1837.



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## Keep Exploring

Your nature journal will be most valuable if you keep at it regularly. Remember that while it's fun to journal on a trip to a park or wilderness, you can do it just about wherever you are. Even city neighborhoods have plants and animals that you'll notice more and more once you start seeing them.

Think of your nature journal as a friend you can take wherever you go. It's

a special spot where you can write, draw, paint, color, and paste whatever you want. It's a place you can ask questions and ponder answers. It's a gathering place for your thoughts and imaginings.

A nature journal is a book that *you* write! The next time you step outdoors, bring your pen and paper and start being the author of your own outdoor adventure. ♻️

**TEACHERS RESOURCES.** Find a Teachers Guide and other resources for this and other Young Naturalists stories at [mndnr.gov/young\\_naturalists](http://mndnr.gov/young_naturalists).

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