



## Tip #117

# Studying Nature through Art

### 117-1, sparrows

This rough sketch let me learn more about what little brown birds frequented my feeders. I sketched very quickly, not worrying about photographic accuracy, just going for those shapes!

Artists have been studying nature with their work for hundreds of years, of course! Before the age of cameras, that's all we had ... and it is still one of the best ways to learn about our environment and those things that share it with us.

The early explorers were often concerned with the flora and fauna (and humans!) they found in far-flung parts of the globe, and either sketched their discoveries themselves, or took an artist along with them.



The historic naturalists ... John James Audubon, John White ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/2-Harkness-Elizabethan Londons Naturalists.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/2-Harkness-Elizabethan%20London%20Naturalists.pdf)), Mark Catesby ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_Catesby](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Catesby)), the 17th Century Maria Sibylla Merian (<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/merian/>), who went to South America to study insects (and later her daughters followed in her footsteps); even William Clark, who made the Voyage of Discovery with Meriwether Lewis in 1804, did sketches and nature studies in his journal!

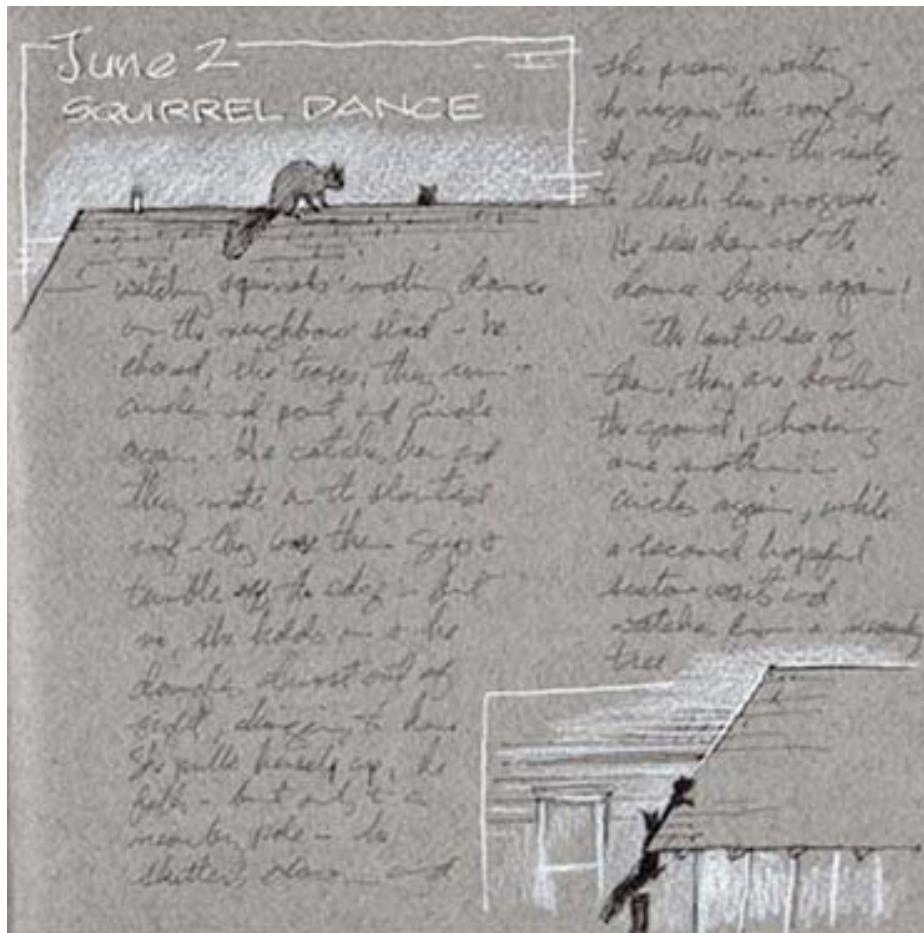
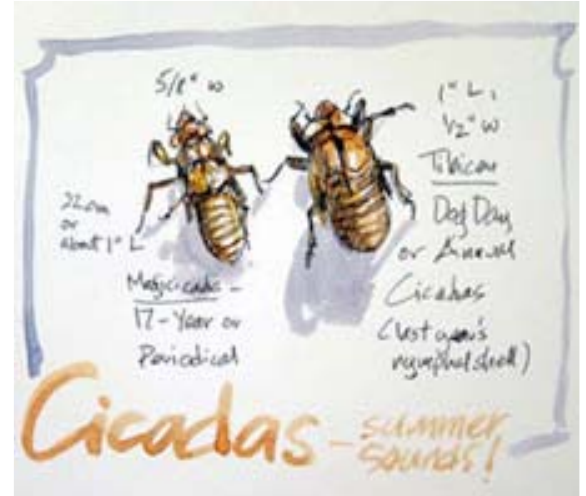
In Victorian and Edwardian times, such study was very popular; young women as well as men filled journals with their observations. You may be familiar with Edith Holden, made famous by her book, *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, and of course beloved children's author Beatrix Potter, creator of Peter Rabbit and Squirrel Nutkin, was a naturalist first. She learned much from firsthand observation, and by her careful renderings.

Why should we do less?

### 117-2, cicadas

This year the periodical cicadas hatched again in my area, after a 17-year hiatus. I got to compare size and shape of their discarded husks to those of our normal Dog Day cicadas, "up close and personal!"

Today, artist/naturalists like Clare Walker Leslie, Hannah Hinchman, Maria Hodkins, John Muir Laws, Keith Brockie and more continue to teach us how to learn from our surroundings ... but our own observations are what will cement these things in our minds.



### 117-3, squirrel dance

Field sketches can be very quick, from life ... we can always refine them later. Sketch what you see, and add details as you can observe them! Use binoculars if you need to – or a magnifying glass. Observe mating rituals or nesting behavior. Make notes about where you found that bird or insect, what it was doing, what it was feeding on – that will help you to learn, as well.

Later, you can identify that butterfly or wildflower from a field guide, add details and more notes you've gleaned from that same field guide, an expert in the field, a nature center, park ranger, or by

searching online. I guarantee you'll remember much more about what you see, and your curiosity will remain as lively as a child's! You'll be surprised at how much more "at home" on this earth you will feel, as well.

#### 117-4, backyard seed pods



I learned a lot about the plants in my backyard from sketching these seedpods and fruits up close. Take this chance to study your own small piece of turf, even as small as 1 square yard – you'll be surprised at the variety you'll find there.

I did a talk for the Sierra Club in 2005, for their first international gathering, on sketching and painting in nature, and what you can learn. With their kind permission, I recently expanded on my presentation and made it available in CD form.

[Much more in-depth information here!](#)



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