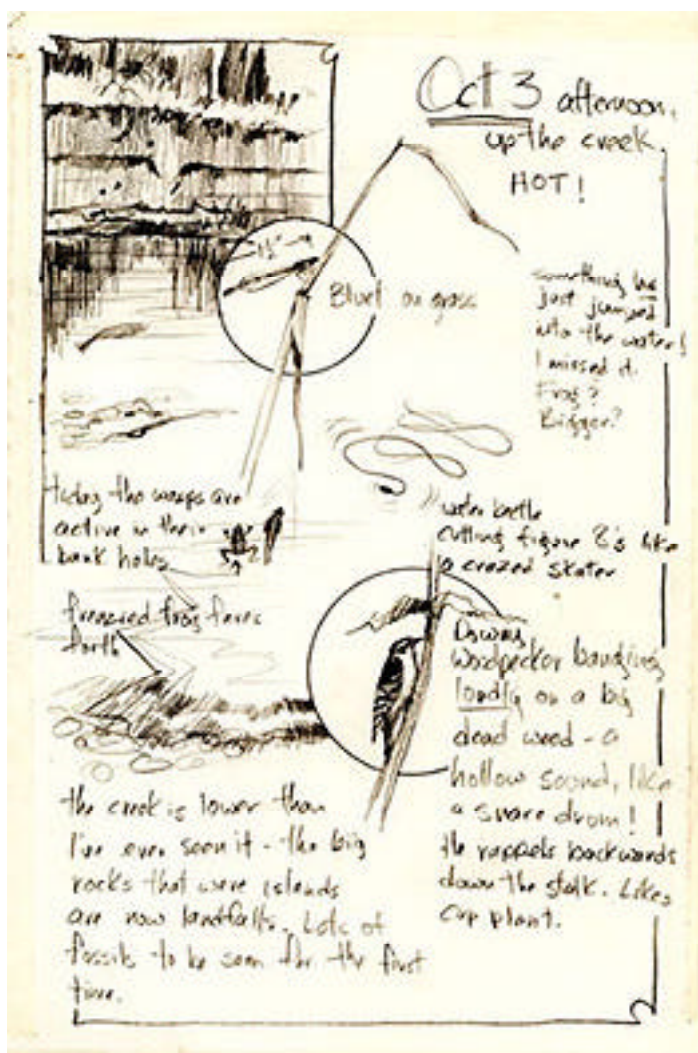


Tip #50

Field Sketching and keeping a nature journal



Field sketching is one of the best ways to learn about nature and your environment, and a wonderful way to fully experience your surroundings. It's a subject close to my heart -- I've written about it many times, in *Country Living Magazine*, *The Artist's Magazine*, *Watercolor Magic*, *Personal Journaling*, and in various books.

You actually stop and take time to draw and make notes about your natural surroundings, rather than just noticing and hoping you'll remember later. It's much quicker to take a snapshot, to be sure, but when we take the time to sketch, we forge a personal relationship that stays in our minds for a very long time.

The simplest tools will let you get started -- a mechanical pencil requires no sharpener and often has a small eraser on the end. A smallish sketchbook or hardbound journal with paper that will take pencil, colored pencil or even light watercolor washes works well. If you like, take a small 6" ruler to measure your finds -- that's it! You can branch out into other tools, like a small watercolor kit, magnifying glass, field bag, binoculars, as you get more into it.

We learn, as well! If there is a flower we can't identify, or phenomenon we don't understand, we can sketch it as carefully as possible given what time we have, make notes of what we see, and find out about it later--from a field guide, a member of the Audubon Society, a botanist or other appropriate expert. It makes learning and understanding like a treasure hunt, and we are as enthusiastic as children again, asking "what's THAT??"

What I often do, when field sketching, is use the date as a heading, and add other pertinent information--location, time of day, temperature, weather conditions. Even writing down sounds or scents act as memory triggers as well as information on relationships or biosystems. In one corner, I'll make a small, rough habitat sketch, then any details that have caught my eye, and whatever notes I want to add. Amazing how such a simple thing can bring back the moment years later...

Focus on a single flower and make notes about how its petals are arrayed or how the leaves fit on the stem--are they opposite? Alternate? Or do an entire field journal page of your morning's ramble. Make a location or habitat sketch, as suggested, then add weed seeds, footprints in the mud, wildlife sightings, whatever ... you'll treasure it!

There are many books out there on field sketching and drawing, my own Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature among them. You can find it at bookstores, some art supply stores, some of the National Park stores, and at <http://amazon.com>. Look also for books by Hannah Hinchman, Clare Walker Leslie, Claudia Nice and others...

I did a presentation for The Sierra Club on getting started with sketching and painting in nature in 2005, at their first national summit gathering. You can find more on these Sierra Club sites: http://www.sierraclubstories.org/stories/people/cathy_johnson.asp and <http://www.sierrasummit2005.org/coverage/r029.asp>; an expanded version of my presentation will soon be available as a data CD on my CafePress store, http://www.cafepress.com/cathy_johnson, by the kind permission of the Sierra Club.

