Why bother to sketch in the field? Why take notes? Why not just take a photograph? Several reasons come to mind. Drawing and painting nature generally require us to observe closely. But sometimes time is short; then a quick sketch can suffice to jog our mind, and a few jotted notes can add more information. A photo is taken in seconds, but captures only one aspect. In a photo sun and shadow can obscure features, sometimes vital ones. A sketch, on the other hand, can record the important characteristics: leaf shape and arrangement, number of petals, environment, location, and much more. A sketch need not be exact and precious, but it should capture the details of the subject or the setting or a landscape. A sketch is personal and, looking back, evokes the time and place even more than a photo can, because we have taken the time to absorb and study. It does not matter how “good” it is artistically.

I do several types of nature sketching and journaling. Sometimes I have only moments to record a moving animal or a fleeting bird—the “jizz” as birders call it. A few notes can record wing bars or face markings. A plant stays still; it affords more time for study. Are the leaves toothed, whorled, or alternately arranged, for example? These details are important for identifying the plant and portraying it correctly, if that is your goal. Sketching, because it encourages us to really look, can awaken an interest in diverse areas of the natural world—lichens, mosses,
insects, birds, and plants and how they interact. In this way sketching enhances and enriches one's experience and helps one feel a part of the natural world, not apart from it.

In our journals we can ask questions or muse on the item. Who pollinates this flower? Who is eating this leaf? What is that funny growth and how did it form? A question might prompt us to do some research, or an answer might come to us at another time, but our minds will have been opened. Recording when and where particular plants or birds are seen can help us locate them in later years or even find a rare species.

Phenology is the study of the seasonal cycles of natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate. It often refers to plant and animal life. Looking back through our journals at old records helps us notice these cycles and seasonal appearances. Because such records are somewhat scattered throughout my journals, I have started putting a large label on front of each, with a summary of what is in the journal for quick reference later. I also keep a “back-door notebook” of findings that cover multiple years. I'm afraid I am not super-organized with it, but it helps me to look back.

While writing about a color scheme or view or object in our journal, we can wax poetic or be practical. Some people prefer to write more than to draw. Writing can help us interact with and experience nature in different ways. For example, a realistic description of a scene might be, “The sun set at 8:35 p.m. with a brilliant sunset.” Poetically, it might be, “As evening approached, a golden glow suffused the land, the trees appeared gilded against dark purple shadows. Fleetingly, the glow appeared and disappeared as if a magic hand had waved a wand.” Both are fine. Haiku or other poetry is another possibility. “Sun, waning gloriously, dark shadows lengthening, Dusk.” So many ways to approach journaling.

When traveling I keep a sketchbook noting not only what I did but scenes of where I have been or oddities I encountered, so it might include a picture of a meal or a quirky sign. My husband sometimes feeds me sandwiches while we picnic, and I do a 15-minute sketch. Or perhaps he patiently enjoys a scene while I record it in more detail.

Over the years I have reduced my kit to a mixed-media sketchbook; a waterproof micron ink pen .005 or .01; a small watercolor palette with compressed cakes of color (such as Winsor and Newton's, or you can make your own); a water brush; and a pad of paper toweling (Viva plain is best as it does not leave a pattern if used to blot up excess water!). A water brush is a brush with an attached tube of water, which with a little squeeze lets some water out. After using one color the brush can be wiped on the paper towel, and it is ready for the next color. This brush is not for large expanses of paper and does have limitations, but it fits in a purse or pocket.

I sometimes take more gear but often do not use it unless I have a lot more time. I also have a travel brush that screws together to protect the bristles. Watercolor pencils or colored pencils are another easy to use, portable medium. Mixed-media sketchbooks work well for watercolor. If I can find a place to sit or have brought a stool, I can work longer, but often I stand, so those sketches are often quite “loose”! These journals are prized possessions I often use as references for other artwork or for remembering our travels. They evoke memories better than just photos.

What means are best for journaling? Whatever way serves to memorialize an event: a scribble, a painting, words, or some combination. It is embracing nature that counts. Even a humble snail or pill bug, a fleeting feisty hummingbird, an opening rosebud, a dried leaf or seed pod—all become beautiful and wonderful when closely observed, and recording them perpetuates the memory. “Wow, I did not know that!” is often a result of such observation. Don't worry about recording every detail. This can always be done later. Some journalers keep quick notes and sketches in one sketchbook, then make more refined illustrations in a different book, adding information from field guides and other resources.
Gardeners often sketch their plants through the season, possibly noticing who is pollinating them—or consuming them! Fishermen, hunters, birders, botanists—all can and do use nature journals to expand their understanding and enjoyment.

Even if you believe you “can’t” draw or rarely do it, if you can hold a pencil you can make simple drawings, and as your observation skills improve, these drawings become more realistic. With practice we become more adept at picking out important details or selecting the relevant items from a busy scene. It is the looking, remembering, and enjoying that count. If you find drawing interests you, you can always learn more.

I often draw in ink (pencil is OK too!) and add color notes or fill in details later from memory. Whatever works for you is fine—the size of book, the materials, and the mode are entirely personal choices and primarily for your enjoyment. I have half-formed sketches, explorations (aka “mistakes”), and finished drawings all in my journals.

There are numerous sketching websites and books, but if you have not journaled before, JUST DO IT. Learn more later. Most of all don’t sweat it, enjoy it.

These are some of the books on sketching and journaling that I have particularly enjoyed:


Frances Topping is an artist, naturalist, and educator with background in geography, botany, zoology, graphic design, and nature science illustration. Read more about her work at: www.francetoppingvisual.com

All photos and artwork courtesy of Frances Topping

Winter 2019

New Members Winter 2019

Gayle Anderson, Wakefield, RI
Vivian Antaya, Charlestown, RI
Elizabeth Bardo, Narragansett, RI
Ann Barnard, Hope Valley, RI
Cordalie Benoit, Westerly, RI
Karen Berg, Warwick, RI
Carlo Borsari, Chepachet, RI
Suzanne Borstein, Cranston, RI
Gail Brodeur, Riverside, RI
Mary Ann Buckley, North Stonington, CT
Frank Carini, Portsmouth, RI
Nick Califano, M.D., Barrington RI
Conanicut Island Land Trust, Newport, RI
Bryant and Dena Coupe, Rumford, RI
Lynn Curtis, Pawtucket, RI
Robert Easton, Pawtucket, RI
David Ellinwood, Cranston, RI
Nick Ernst, Westerly, RI
Heather Evans, Providence, RI
Jane Ferguson, Providence, RI
Evelyn Ferranti, Cranston, RI
Martha Frances Foster, North Providence, RI
Judith & Peter Gengler, Rehoboth, MA
Sarah Gleason, Providence, RI
Janet Grant, Jamestown, RI
Kathleen Guarino, North Kingstown, RI
Karen Hansen, Portsmouth, RI
Catherine Herman, Warwick, RI
Anna Highsmith, Providence, RI
Richard Hitt, Jamestown, RI
Gerard L’Heureux, Jamestown, RI
Barbara Levine, Seekonk, MA
Christine Lichatz, Providence, RI
Julie Lizzio, Shannock, RI
Katherine Long, Kingston, RI
Karen Longeteig, Providence, RI
Katrina Lutz, Chepachet, RI
Cindy Marchesella, North Kingstown, RI
Tiffany Medrano, North Providence, RI
Tamara Metz, Providence, RI
Kristen & Richard Miner, Newport, RI
Jane Mitchell, Wakefield, RI
Patricia Molloy, East Providence, RI
Marjorie Murphy, West Kingston, RI
Mary O’Keeffe, Chepachet, RI
Rick Oriel, Newport, RI
Janet Parkinson, Newport, RI
Kate Pehworth, Portsmouth, RI
Lynne Peterson, Melrose, FL
Elaine Powers, Greenville, RI
Beatrice Pulliam, Cranston, RI
Carol Reppucci, Narragansett, RI
Ginger Ryan, Little Compton, RI
Romona Silk, Barrington, RI
Douglas Stephens, Johnston, RI
Tracey Swanson & Giovanni De Petriss, Shelton, CT
Debora Taylor, Warwick, RI
Susanne Theriault, Little Compton, RI
Stephanie Trabucco, Cranston, RI
Darlene Trott, Warwick, RI
Elizabeth Tylawsky, Woodstock, CT
Chris Van Hemelryck, Narragansett, RI
Sandra-Lynn White, Cumberland, RI
Susan Wood, Barrington, RI
Irene Ziegler, Providence, RI

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