

Tips for Keeping a Nature Journal

What You Need

Unlined notebooks that are large enough to record observations and yet small enough to fit in day packs

Colored pencils or pens

Waterproof Ziplock bags to keep the soon-to-be-prized possessions dry

Field guides written especially for your location

Hand lens and binoculars for a close-up view of objects

Ask Questions like a Naturalist

In their journals, naturalists take detailed notes called species accounts, which are filled with observations about the behavior, size, shape and other characteristics of a particular species. Begin your species account by recording the date, time, weather and location of your setting. Select a subject that is very specific--an object like a patch of violets is easier to take in than a sweeping view. After you've decided what to study, ask yourself questions about it. If you have chosen a flower, for example, you might ask: What does it smell like? Are the leaves and stem smooth or fuzzy? What about its color? Is it bright or dark? Are the petals thick, delicate or velvety? Take a closer look with a hand lens--can you see pollen? What insects visit this flower?

Use the answers to these questions to start your species account. Don't worry about not knowing the names of plants and animals. You can even create your own names, then compare them to the real ones in your field guides over lunch or at home.

Creative Note-taking

Another way to record the details of what you see is by adding illustrations. Your sketches don't need to look beautiful--the important thing is to record what you see. Label your drawings with specifics about the various colors, textures and behaviors they observe. Also, poetic reflections of feelings about the objects make wonderful complements to the more objective, scientific descriptions that fill most field journals. If possible, follow various species over time.

Learning to See

A wonderful part of keeping a field journal is that it increases your awareness of all that exists, whether it is the budding apple trees in your backyard, a chickadee at the bird feeder or a trail of delicate deer tracks in the snow. The more you watch and pay attention, the more details you will notice -- like the family of newts that lives in the decaying underside of a birch log, or to the fox den beneath the old pine tree. Share your nature journal with your friends and family.