The grace to be a beginner is always the best prayer for an artist. The beginner’s humility and openness lead to exploration. Exploration leads to accomplishment. All of it begins at the beginning, with the first small and scary step.”
~ Julia Cameron (The Artist’s Way)

I wish I could draw. This is what most people tell me when they avoid putting pencil to paper. My reply is “You can, but your expectations are in the way.” Too often, we focus on the product – what we want to create. Our culture values the end result: the finished item, the goal reached, the happy ending. Instead, think about the process of drawing, not the product. A few pencil marks can reflect an observation and a connection. For me, the process of keeping a visual journal is a pathway. Every time I sketch something, I deepen my relationship with nature; I get to know my subject on an intimate level, I ask questions, reflect, and explore.

Those of us who draw and write about the natural world carry on a long historical tradition of curiosity, exploration, and investigation. Explorers documented discoveries from their travels, herbalists described useful plants, and gardeners recorded specimens for their beauty. Their drawings and observations expanded our knowledge of useful and beautiful flora, and
Elizabeth Smith’s nature journals are beautiful and informative.
taught us about the world we live in. Florida's unique flora and fauna encouraged study and journal-keeping by many notable naturalists and artists including William Bartram, John James Audubon, Mark Catesby, Martin Johnson Heade, and John Muir.

My first journals were like notes to myself – about what I planted and where, about the butterflies that visited nectar and larval plants, and the birds I saw in my yard. When I visited parks or hiked in the woods, I’d write down the plants I was able to identify, and what flowers were blooming. Then I started to add small sketches and photos, maps, and pressed leaves. I also kept a separate sketchbook for ideas, studies, and color mixes, because I paint in watercolors.

At some point, separate journals blended into one nature art journal composed mainly of sketches and quick paintings, with notes and observations.

My subject matter varies – one day it might be a flowering shrub, the next day a snail shell. I particularly enjoy drawing our native plants and wildlife, and observing them through the seasons. I've been inspired to add calligraphy and poetry to my images to express the emotional response I felt by a particular setting or situation. I find it helpful to add the date, weather, and temperature information, sometimes incorporating it into my art. The entries I make are an exploration of serendipitous sightings rather than a more detailed study of a species or ecological system; specific types of records are important, however.

Written accounts by American naturalists Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold comprise the backbone of a recent study comparing historical and current spring blooming times of native plants in the United States. Scientists have determined that current flowering times are occurring much earlier than those reported 50 to 100 years ago. A collaboration between researchers from Boston and Harvard Universities and the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the study was published online at plosone.org (Public Library of Science One), and was only possible because Thoreau and Leopold kept meticulous notes about the natural world around them. Today, citizen scientists around the world contribute observations via the Internet for natural science organizations such as YardMap (yardmap.com), sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and Project Noah (projectnoah.org), backed by National Geographic.

No matter the purpose, sketching and note-taking sharpens our observation skills, improves sketching abilities, and helps create new sorts of connections. I'd like to encourage you to keep a visual journal as a personal journey of exploration, a documentation of yard or garden, or as a learning tool. Think about how you might want to use the information in the future, and how you might organize the material for reference. Your journal might start with simple drawings augmented with photos and descriptive words. It might be a chronicle of wildlife or birds.

I’ve discovered what makes these journals valuable to me: my drawing and painting skills have sharpened, especially when I draw on a weekly basis. Observation has improved – I find myself specifically seeking out details in order to capture them on the fly or to write them down later. My knowledge base has become more dimensional; not only have I learned more, my emotional connection to nature has become more specific and I have a deeper sense of how individual parts fit into the whole.

Consider incorporating other disciplines and different art techniques in your journal. Write a Haiku poem. Add anecdotes or maps: historical connections add meaning and sometimes explain present day circumstances. Leaf and bark rubbings, leaf prints, or pressed flowers make interesting additions, especially if we’re stumped on how to reproduce a texture or leaf shape. Mathematics has a place in our journals in the form of time, measurements, and patterns. Many plant lovers are familiar with the Fibonacci sequence, seen in the spiral patterns of pinecones, pineapples, and sunflower heads.

Remember to keep in mind the process, and not get involved with the outcome of each page. As you practice, you’ll find your skills improving in every area. Don’t be discouraged if you start and then stop. When you’re ready, you’ll pick up your journal again and the words and pictures will flow onto the page. Remember that it all “begins at the beginning” with that first small and scary step. This is your exploration of the beauty of life around you!
Early naturalists who kept written and visual journals as they visited Florida

William Bartram – Bartram traveled to Florida in 1774, as part of a commissioned trip to explore, collect, and draw plants throughout what is now the American South. He first visited British East Florida, traveling the St. John’s River inland to the area that is now Payne’s Prairie. His observations of the natural world, as well as that of native cultures, were recorded in words and drawings, and eventually published as Bartram’s Travels, an important contribution to the scientific and literary worlds.

John James Audubon – Working on his masterpiece, Birds of America, Audubon traveled to St. Augustine in 1831. He explored the Halifax and St. John’s River surroundings, collecting and drawing bird specimens. In 1832 he expanded his bird documentation, voyaging by boat to Florida Bay, the Florida Keys, and the Dry Tortugas. Audubon’s legacy appears everywhere in America – most notably with the establishment of the National Audubon Society, one of our oldest environmental organizations.

Mark Catesby – Catesby traveled throughout the southeastern areas of North America, collecting and recording what he observed. His notes and paintings were published in 1731 and 1733 in separate volumes titled The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands, the first printed account of North America’s flora and fauna. This self-taught artist strove to catalog the relationships between species on a scientific basis, work that Linnaeus referred to as a basis for his binomial system of classification.

Martin Johnson Heade – Heade moved to St. Augustine in 1883, at the age of 64, and later opened a studio under the patronage of Henry Flagler. Although an oil painter best known for his luminous landscapes and exquisite portraits of tropical hummingbirds and orchids, Heade (under the pseudonym Didymus) was also an outspoken advocate for the conservation and preservation of natural resources. Fascinated by the vistas of Florida’s marshes and swamps, he continued to paint light-filled subtropical landscapes as well as detailed studies of tropical flowers and plants.

John Muir – Many people are familiar with the writings of John Muir, but may not realize that he also sprinkled his journals with pencil drawings of landscapes and plants spotted on his walks and hikes. He visited Florida for several months in 1867 as the culmination of a 1,000-mile hike from Indiana. Muir is beloved as the founder of the Sierra Club, and considered the father of our National Parks. In 1903 he accompanied President Theodore Roosevelt to Yosemite Valley, an experience which inspired the president to lay the groundwork for our national park system.

Keep a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You by Claire Walker Leslie and Charles Roth. The authors explore the value of nature journaling, giving examples of different styles, ideas for themes, equipment, drawing basics, and ending with chapters on teaching and sharing nature journaling, including a suggested scale for assessing journals. A great tool for educators.

Watercolourist’s Nature Journal by Jill Bays. If you are interested in using watercolor, this is a nice book to browse. The author assumes you have some basic skills, and briefly discusses materials and procedures at the beginning, adding other materials and techniques throughout the book.

About the Author

Elizabeth Smith spent her early years in the woods and waters of Iowa developing a love for plants and wildlife. She has a BA in art from Florida Gulf Coast University, and is a longtime member of FNPS. Elizabeth is one of ten Florida artists selected to participate in the Greater Everglades Conservation Atlas project. Her goals are to use nature and art to increase awareness, enjoyment and stewardship of the natural world. To see more of her work, visit her website, lizardart.com or her blog, http://natureartjournal.blogspot.com/

Conference Workshop: Nature Journaling with Elizabeth Smith

Learn the basics of nature journaling through sketching, note taking and watercolor, as a means of recording field observations at the 2013 FNPS Annual Conference. For details, visit fnps.org/conference/workshops.