

# Getting Started with Nature Sketching

Quick & easy tips to have you sketching outdoors TODAY!



Created by naturalist and visual artist Christine Elder

# Welcome!

I am so pleased that you picked up my sketching guide. I have used the techniques in these pages to teach hundreds of people of all ages to draw with more freedom and confidence.

The practice of sketching is one of the best ways I've discovered to build a deep and informed connection with the natural world. Observing and sketching what you see is a time-honored tradition practiced by many of history's great naturalists, from John James Audubon to Meriwether Lewis and John Muir.



If you learn one thing by reading these materials, it should be that sketching is about much more than drawing a pretty picture. I've found that in the process of observing something long enough to draw a picture of it, one learns more about its behavior and form than dozens of photos or books could provide, and you'll have fun while you're at it! I find it so rewarding to share my love of nature sketching and to watch my students gain the confidence to explore the natural world through their sketch books. Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'CE' in a stylized, cursive font.

## What people are saying about Christine's teaching style



*"Christine Elder has a refreshingly welcoming approach to teaching about nature through art that reflects her obvious passion for wildlife and conservation of our natural environment. Whether at her home in Oregon or visiting us deep in the tropics at the Vallarta Botanical Garden, she has a marvelous potential to connect people with nature in a rich and meaningful way"*

—Neil Gerlowski, Executive Director, Vallarta Botanical Garden



*"Christine is such a wonderful teacher. She knows her field really well and is very generous with her time and information. Her classes are top of the line and so much fun."*

—Lorna Cahall, Returning Student



*"Christine ignites the studio classroom with her in-depth knowledge of wildlife biology, illustration, drawing and painting to create a unique, diverse learning environment for artists of all ages! All of Christine's classes are high quality opportunities for our students"*

—Deborah Allen, Former Arts Education Manager, Art Station of Bend

# Is This Guide For You?!

This basic sketching guide will benefit anyone who wants to learn and practice their drawing skills. Perhaps you've always wanted to draw but were too busy, or you liked drawing in school but haven't picked up a sketching pencil in years. Or you're an accomplished artist in another medium but have never practiced drawing. Whatever your level, this guide should help. Everyone can benefit from the practice of drawing. Studies show that partaking in a relaxing activity like drawing is an effective stress reducer (and we could *all* use less stress!). The practice of drawing shouldn't be regarded as just a means to create a 'work of art.' For me, it is both a meditative practice and a means of learning about my subject, and if I end up with a something that I like, that's icing on the cake!

## What You'll Learn

In this guide, we focus on depicting the two-dimensional shapes of our subjects in order to form a solid foundation for further study. Too often I see people rush to add 3-dimensional form, texture and color without a firm grasp of shape. This may lead to disappointment with your finished product, because something about your drawing will feel 'off'—and that something is usually due to skipping over a careful observation of your subject's shape.

In our first exercise, I lead you step-by-step through drawing a leaf. Leaves are great subjects, because they are readily available; they come in a wide variety of shapes; and they are mostly flat (or you can press them flat!), so you won't be overwhelmed by the challenge of depicting 3-D form. Next we move on to some activities that will help you to warm up your sketching muscles and help shift your brain to its right side. My students always find these drawing activities fun and challenging, and they often experience creative breakthroughs as a result.

I've also included some tips and ideas for drawing outdoors and some more information about ways I can help you continue your path to learning nature sketching.

After completing the sketching exercises in this guide, I hope you'll feel more free and confident to continue drawing on your own. If you do, you'll find the practice of sketching to be a pleasurable and relaxing hobby that can educate you about the natural world and that you can enjoy for years to come.

## What tools are needed to complete this guide?

All you need are a pencil and paper. I like to use a mechanical pencil because it always stays sharp, but any pencil will do. To complete the drawing exercises, you may simply use the photos and sketches in this guide or you may collect photos or real subjects for inspiration.

# Conquering Your Fears

Many people have a fear of drawing. My goal for you is to release any fear you may have about needing to draw a “pretty” picture, and instead focus on enjoying the process of learning about your subject. When you are first starting out, process is more important than product. Even if you think your drawing looks like a piece of dog ‘doo-doo,’ and you throw it in the trash, the time you’ve spent observing your subject will never be lost and will give you a greater appreciation for that which you’ve drawn.

Practice, and enjoy the process. There’s no need to set the bar so high on yourself; you wouldn’t expect to be born able to ballet dance or play the clarinet! For some reason, folks think they should be born artists, and it’s just not true! Be kind to yourself.

*“Drawing is not a magical ability, it is a teachable, learnable skill.”*

—Betty Edwards, author of *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*

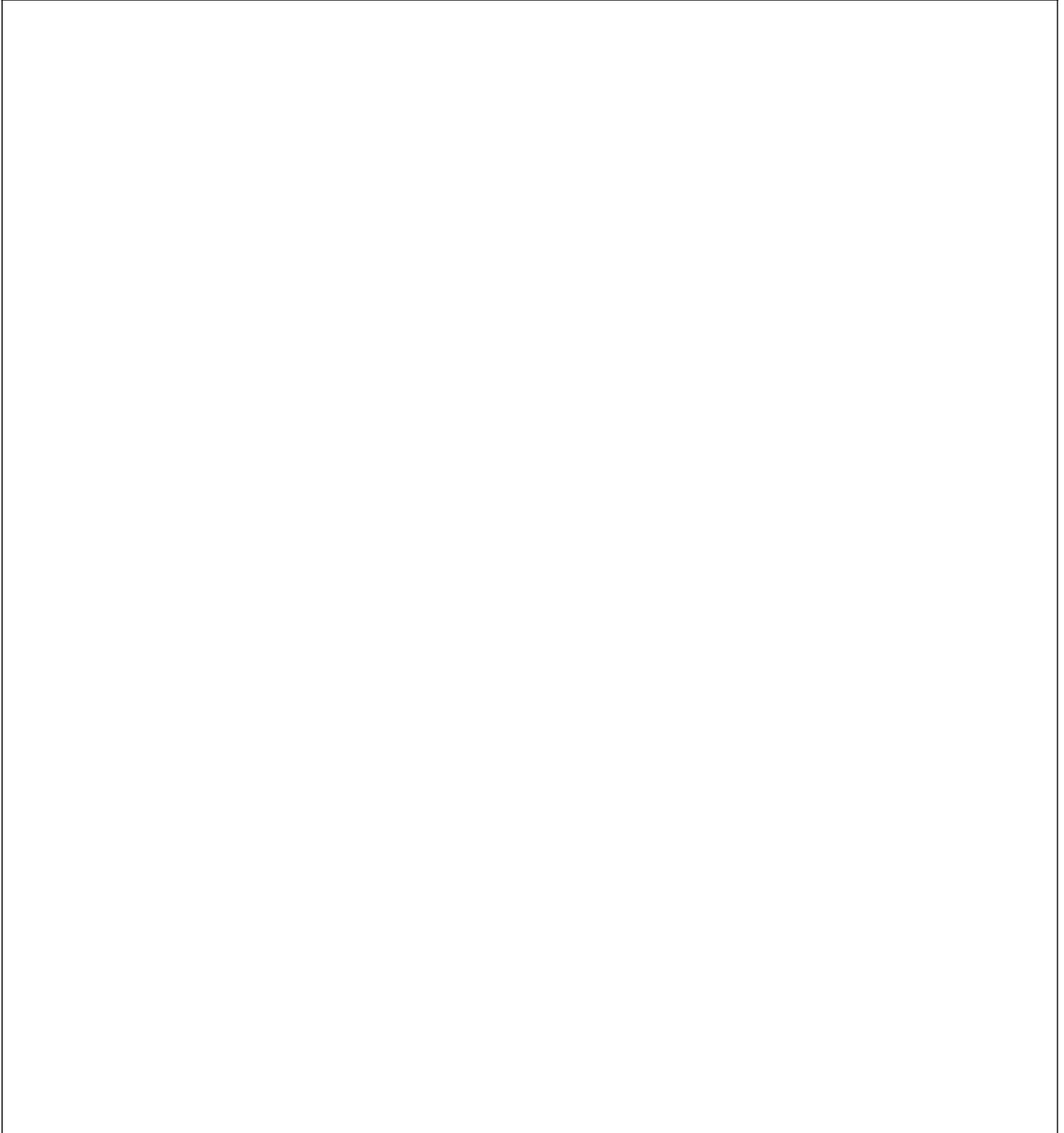
# Let's practice sketching a leaf!

If you're new to sketching, drawing a simple leaf is a good place to start. Many leaves are relatively flat, allowing you to focus your attention on the practice of depicting shape, without getting overwhelmed with three-dimensional form. Hint: you can use most of these same steps to draw anything! *Wanna see the following steps in action? Watch my video tutorial on sketching a leaf on my website: <http://christineelder.com/tutorials>*

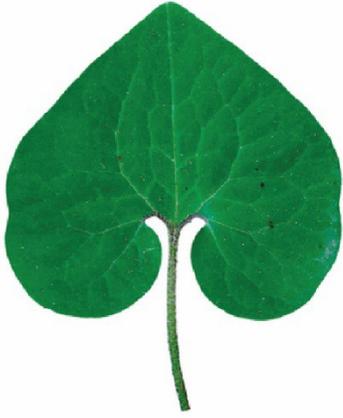
1. Set aside about 10–20 minutes for this exercise. Find an interesting leaf that is smaller than half the size of your paper (or use leaf photos I've provided for you on the next page). Get a pencil & paper. Place your leaf on the paper.
2. Carefully observe the leaf first, noting its general size and shape before you start drawing.
3. Place the leaf on the left or right half of the paper. You'll start your drawing on the remaining half of the paper.
4. Using your pencil as a measuring tool, measure the width and length of the leaf; place marks onto the blank side of the paper that match those same measurements. This is the 'foundation' upon which you'll build your 'house.'
5. Using a very light touch, draw a single line to represent the stem and the main central vein.
6. Look at the overall shape of the leaf; for example, is it linear, oval, square, or rectangular?
7. Draw the shape that represents the outermost edges of your leaf. Again, use a very light touch, like you're just tickling the surface of the paper. Be gentle and loose with your line. Avoid erasing what you consider to be mistakes as these lines can actually be helpful in guiding you to be more accurate.
8. Now we'll firm up the lines that best represent the shape of our subject. Start at the stem. Slowly, and in a clockwise direction, draw the perimeter as if you are an ant crawling along the edge of the leaf. Frequently look back and forth between your subject and your sketch to 'ground truth,' making sure you're drawing from your direct observation and not your imagination or preconceived notion of how you think it should look, or from your brain's symbol for a leaf.
9. Continue to make corrections, remembering that no mark is sacred. Work all areas equally, not committing to any one line or finishing any one area before the others.
10. Add the veins of the leaf. Notice how the leaf stem and veins taper toward the tip, like a tree getting narrower the farther it is from the ground. Their overall shape may even mimic the shape of an entire tree. Now give some width to the line that represented the stem.
11. Show the leaf's imperfections—like anything in nature, each leaf is different and still beautiful. Showing torn edges, insect holes or discolorations will give personality and individuality to your sketch.
12. Look over your sketch and leaf once more, firming up your best lines and lightly erasing the others.

**Congratulations! You just drew a leaf!** Now you have a basis from which to continue to a more finished drawing, like adding shading or color, but this is a great start for a first sketch.

**Additional Practice** – collect more leaves or practice using the photographs on the next page. For now, just focus on their general shape or silhouette. Once you feel confident with that, you may want to try adding textures, patterns, or shading, although I will cover these challenges in another sketching guide.



# Practice Drawing These Varied Shapes



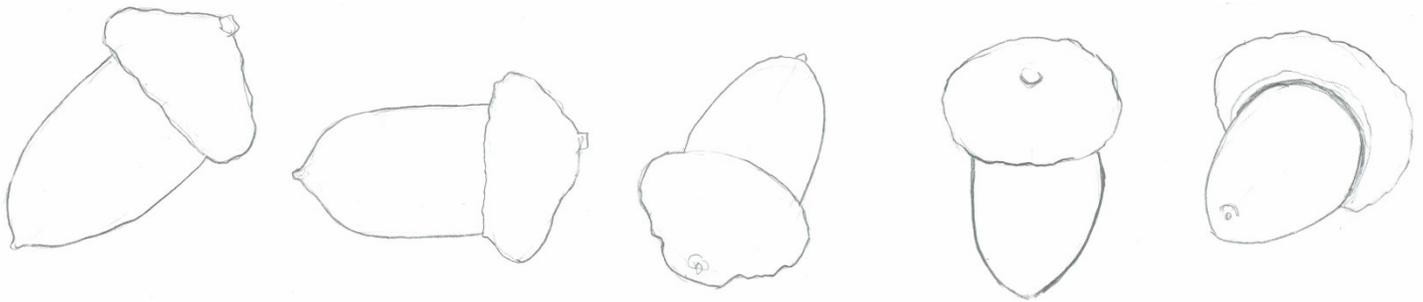
# More Sketching Challenges

Ready for something a little more challenging that will stretch and grow your sketching skills? Try these fun exercises, and repeat them often. They will help you develop your observation skills by training you to really LOOK at your subject like a naturalist would. Even though I've been an artist for decades, I still like to warm up in the morning with some or all of these exercises.

I have adapted some of these skills from the classic drawing book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* by Betty Edwards. In each of the numbered exercises below, look at my example for inspiration, then create your own sketch by either copying my sketch, using the accompanying photo, or finding your own subject or photo. Focus on depicting the silhouette or external shape accurately.

1. Draw one object repeatedly, perhaps turning it slightly each time, or drawing it from different angles.

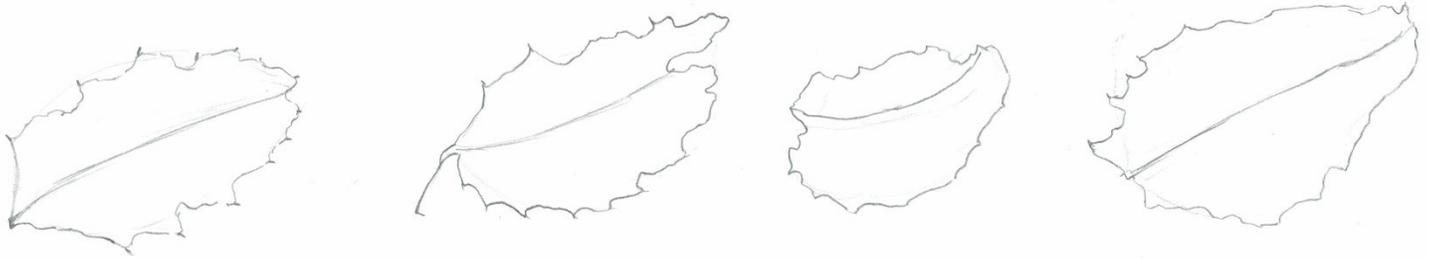
My example:



Your turn:

2. Draw different examples of the same type of organism, like 5 leaves from the same plant, focusing on collecting ones that really vary – you may be surprised when you look closely just how many different shapes, colors, or ages of leaves can be on the same plant. Some might be deformed by insects or weather damage, don't ignore these! In your sketch, really attempt to depict those slight differences. It will really give you some appreciation for variety in nature.

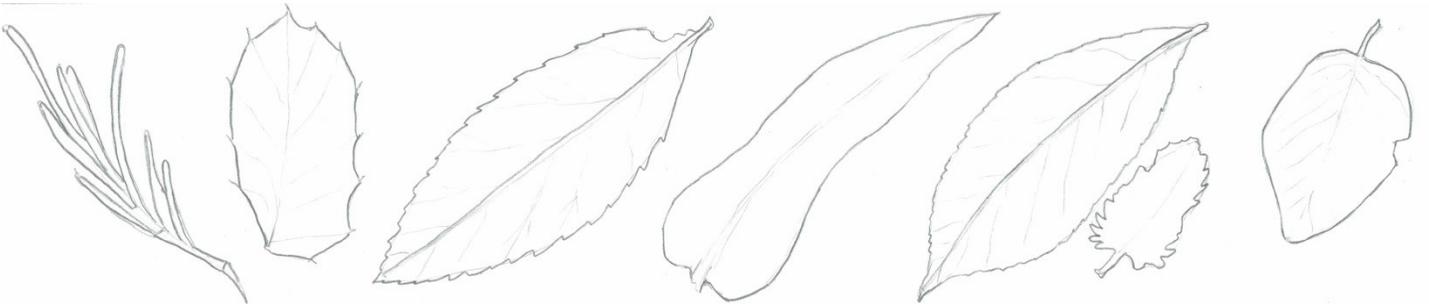
My example:



Your turn:

3. Draw different but similar organisms, like leaves from different kinds of plants in your neighborhood or a local park. You could even make this a fun exercise to share with a friend! Once you start looking around, you'll be amazed at the variety of plants you see, even if you live in a big city.

My example:



Your turn:

4. Draw the negative space around your object, instead of the object itself.

My example:

Your turn:



5. **Draw upside down.** This exercise is so fun and your results will surprise you! Pick an object or a photograph and turn it upside down, then draw it that way! Because your mind is especially good at symbolizing, this works especially well if you use a photo of a familiar object that you might otherwise rush to draw.

My example:

Your turn:



7. **Draw a mirror image.** This is an advanced mind-bending exercise in which you attempt to draw something turned in the opposite direction.

My example:

Your turn:



Photograph of horse used through a Creative Commons license: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/firelizard5/>

I hope these exercises have been fun for you and that you've felt renewal of your own creativity. Practice these often, and I know you'll become more confident and relaxed in your sketching ability.

# Tips for Sketching Outdoors

- Dress appropriately for changing weather conditions, considering the need for sun and rain protection, and don't forget water and snacks!
- Bring collecting materials—plastic jars, plant press (feathers, shells, leaves—please no live organisms, they need to stay in their own homes!).
- Bring observing materials—small hand lens or large magnifying lens, binoculars, spotting scope, camera.
- Use a hard-cover spiral-bound notebook or a clipboard of whatever size is most comfortable to you.

## If I live in the city, where can I go to sketch?

I know it can feel challenging to find some natural places if you live in a city and are surrounded by freeways, high-rises or strip malls. Here are a few suggestions for places I like to go sketching when I'm in a city:

- Parks (even dog exercise parks are great for practicing sketches of live, moving animals)
- Zoo, aquarium, arboretum, or herbarium
- Natural history museum (draw the taxidermy specimens, fossils and such)
- Pet store (sketch the goldfish, hamsters, geckos and canaries!)
- College science departments—they often have exhibits of local wildlife, fossils, gems & minerals that are open to the public.
- Wildlife rescue centers—volunteer or donate and visit to see a wide range of local animals being nursed back to health.
- Your neighbors' bird feeders, nest boxes and water features, or better yet, set some up for yourself and you may be surprised by how quickly you'll get visiting birds, butterflies and mammals.

## What if the weather makes me want to stay inside?

When you can't get outside or just want to practice sketching live animals, visit a live wildlife cam on the computer! There are many available all over the world—if it's nighttime on this side of the world, it is morning on the other! The Smithsonian National Zoological Park has a good one of their elephants, lions and pandas, to name a few. Just google "wildlife web cam" or "nest cam" for lots of other possibilities.

Here are a few additional inclement weather tips:

- Draw your pets or houseplants
- Draw a 'still life' collection of objects from your kitchen
- Start collecting photographs from magazines or look online for inspirational photos.

- Plan ahead, and collect ‘nature treasures’ anytime you go outside—leaves, feathers, shells, rocks, seeds, etc. Tip: whenever I travel or go for a hike, I bring along a little box to protect delicate structures as I transport them home. I’ve even been known to find and bring home dead birds and bones, but if you try this, don’t handle them with your bare hands!
- You could order preserved specimens or living organisms to study and draw, from teacher supply companies like Carolina Biological Supply (carnivorous plants, hermit crabs, frogs, oh my!)

## Congratulations, you’ve finished!

Thanks so much for taking the time to read this guide. I hope some of the sketching activities were helpful in giving you some practice and some confidence to apply what you’ve learned and to inspire you to go out into the natural world and enjoy recording what you see.



Field sketches of birds by Christine Elder, 2015

# Let's Keep in Touch

Here are a few ways you can keep in touch in order to learn more about nature sketching, as well as keeping up-to-date with what I share from my travels and explorations of the natural world.

## 1) Share your nature sketches

I would love to see what you've sketched during or after completing this guide. Share your work on my private Facebook group, [Drawing From Nature](#), which I created just for my students.

## 2) Learn more about nature sketching

Get access to my fun video and written sketching tutorials, and also download my "play" sheets on my Nature Sketching Tutorials page (<http://christineelder.com/tutorials>). You may also be interested in learning about the nature sketching retreats I lead to such exotic locales as Mexico and Honduras!

## 3) Join my newsletter list

If you'd like to get even more help, plus my nature notes, travel tales, wildlife spotlights, and behind the scenes access to my studio, sign up at: <http://christineelder.com/join-nature-notes>

## 4) Contact me

I'd love to hear from you with any comments or suggestions to improve this guide. I would especially love to see examples of the sketches you've produced as a result of working through this guidebook.

Also, I'd love to know what you'd like to learn next. Would you like tutorials on sketching flowers, birds, mammals, reptiles, fish or amphibians? What media or techniques are you curious to try?

Email me at: [christine@wildnaturalist.com](mailto:christine@wildnaturalist.com)

Mailing address: P.O. Box 6752, Bend Oregon 97701

## 5) Connect on social media





## About the Author

I feel so lucky to be able to combine my two passions: art and nature. In college, I studied both, earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees in biology, then completing a graduate certificate in science illustration. I've spent over 20 years helping folks young and old find new ways to enjoy and appreciate the natural world. I've had the privilege of working with such fine organizations as the National Park Service, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the Botanical Society of America, and many others.

I find deep solace in nature and I enjoy passing on that feeling of joy to others. I love sharing stories about the natural world through multi-disciplinary techniques that incorporate art, song, dance and writing.

My passion for the natural world has taken me far and wide, from the wilds of Alaska to the tropical rainforests of Honduras. I've had many adventures like scuba diving with sharks, being chased by moose, tracking bears by moonlight, and even studying the sex lives of carnivorous plants! I now make my home among the pine-clad foothills of central Oregon's Cascade Mountains.

Keep in touch, and happy sketching!

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