

Getting Started with Nature Journaling

An inspirational guide to techniques and supplies for drawing
anytime and anywhere!



Written and Illustrated by Christine Elder

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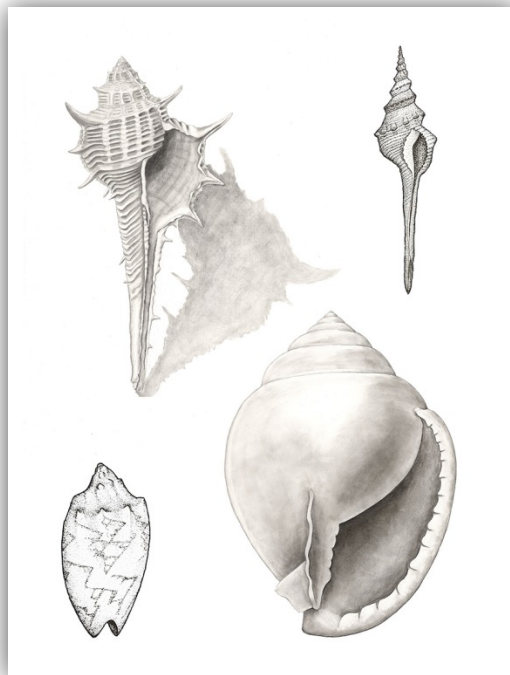
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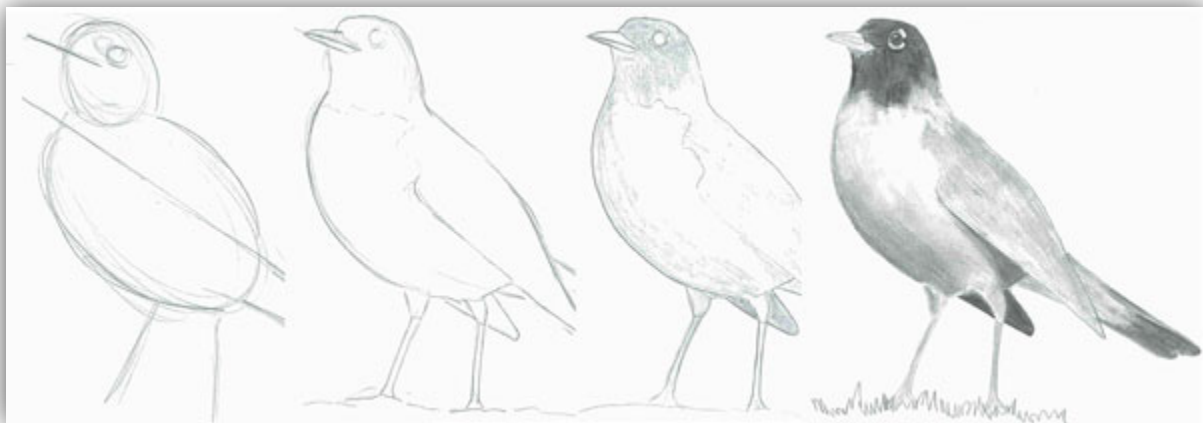


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By Christine Elder

Welcome!

This guide is designed to help you get prepared creatively, mentally and physically for sketching nature in the outdoors. It includes four sections: 1) Suggestions for elements to include in your field journals, 2) Ideas for sparking your creativity and observation skills 3) Ideas for a multitude of places to find interesting things to sketch, no matter the season or weather, and 4) Recommendations for art, field and clothing supplies. And lastly, I've included a list of references for further learning about sketching and nature journaling by my favorite authors. I have chosen to supply website links for ease of viewing or shopping, especially if I think you might not be familiar with the item I'm discussing.



Suggestions for Elements to Include in your Field Journals

Channel your inner naturalist/explorer, as if you were, say Meriwether Lewis or Charles Darwin. Act as if your job was to thoroughly document everything you saw and heard. Pretend that you're living before the age of cameras and videos, and that your journal notes and sketches will be the only proof of existence of the phenomena you witness out in the field.

Your field sketch pages may have none, some, or all of the written elements below depending upon time available, size of paper and your goals for the page. As some folks say "the devil is in the details". The more written and illustrated details you add, the richer your experience will be creating them, the more useful your sketches will be for future development, and the more vivid your memories will be from looking back at your journal. As a general guideline, I suggest adding more notes than you think you'll need. Act as if you might never get a chance to observe this species or habitat again (it may well be true!)



Here are a few of the written elements to consider adding to your journal page:

Date, location (GPS coordinates if you're in the wilderness), weather, time, habitat, labels of anatomical parts, scale of your drawing compared to the size of the organism you're sketching (ie 1/2 x, 10x), characteristics of your subject; such as color, pattern, texture, behavior, sounds, pleasant scents or foul odors, and basically any information you might need to help you identify the species you are drawing or details that you don't have the time or skill to depict visually. Note also if you took a



photo, video or sound recording. Include questions you have about your subject that you can look up later and observations of behavior and hypotheses about their meanings. Don't forget to add your signature!

- The more notes you write, the better, especially if the goal is to identify an unknown species later from your field notes.
- A famous quote or stanza from a song or poem. I use [Brainy Quotes](#) to find inspiring ones.
- Your own poetry or prose inspired by the moment. For inspiration for your prose, check out books by writers who explore nature subjects in thoughtful and provocative ways. Some of my favorites are John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Ann Zwinger, Barry Lopez, Barbara Kingsolver, John McPhee, David Quammen to name just a few.



Physical items you might also consider adding to your pages:

- Photographs, clippings from newspapers or magazines, parts of a city or topo map, a feather, a pressed flower or leaf (but avoid fleshy ones that will wrinkle your sketch pages with their moisture.) You might also try doing a leaf rubbing to capture the intricate details of a leaf's venation or making a mushroom spore print to help identify an edible species.



General notes about the sketched elements of your journal

- The more you know about a subject's anatomy, the more you'll be able to know what types of observations to make that will aid in later identification. For example, in flowers, the number of petals (4, 5, 6, or many) is diagnostic in identification of plant families. Similarly, an invertebrate with six legs is an insect, eight legs is an arachnid.
- Try practicing drawing an anticipated subject ahead of time at home from photos or videos so you'll be familiar with its form and behaviors when you encounter it in the field.



- It's ideal if you can sketch (or at least observe and make notes of) more than one specimen, which will reduce the likelihood of sketching an anomaly—like a 4-leaf clover—and being misled, thinking that's the norm.
- Draw an individual organism until you've captured all of its poses and behavior, or if it's a plant, try drawing it from several different angles, and in different seasons.



"Myiarchus" Flycatcher
Guanaja Island
Honduras, 1/23/2015

- Aim for a loose, casual style that artists call gesture or thumbnail sketches. Capturing an organism's gestalt (or what bird watchers call its 'giss'; or general impression, shape and size) is more desirable than trying for a detailed illustration when sketching living, moving creatures in field conditions. So, capturing behaviors and postures is more important than trying to depict every single feather or leaf.

- In general, be open to serendipity, observe every detail, be ever curious, and retain your childlike sense of wonder and delight.

Ideas for Sparking your Creativity and Observation Skills

Below you'll find a plethora of ideas for sketching, so you'll never be without inspiration for how to fill your sketchbook pages. The first four ideas were borrowed from the excellent book produced by the California Native Plant Society called *Opening the World through Nature Journaling*.

- **Comparisons:** compare and contrast similar items to hone your observation skills—two similar shells on a beach, two similar birds in the forest. To further the challenge, try comparing two individuals of the same species to find even more minute differences—two genders of a bird, two leaves from the same tree.
- **Plant Time Line:** observe a flowering plant, shrub or tree. Find examples of its flowers in each stage, from an unopened bud, to an open flower in all its beautiful glory, to the seed pod that matures after pollination.



- **Zoom in, Zoom out:** Draw the same scene at three different magnifications. This can be on a large or small scale. For example—observe and draw a tree surrounded by its forest, then move closer and just draw the tree in greater detail, then zoom in to draw a single branch or leaf. On a smaller scale, you could draw a small object, then use a magnifying lens to get even closer. For example, draw a large orb weaver spider and its beautiful web, then zoom in to draw just a section of its web in greater detail, and then just the spider's beady eyes!



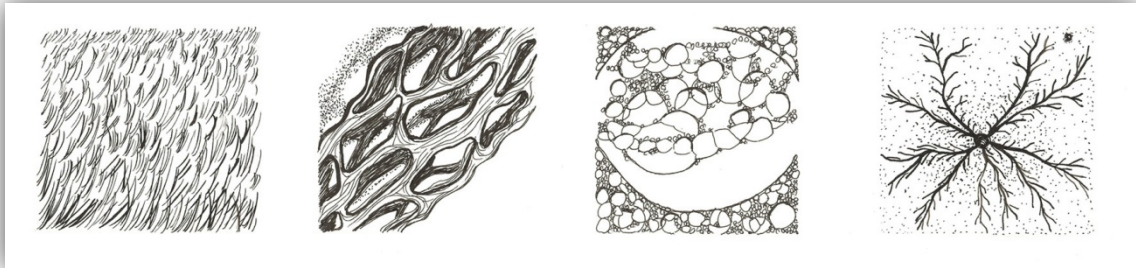
- **Maps and cross sections:** create a map of your garden or a cross section of a creek and its riparian vegetation as it changes with distance from the water's edge.
- **A biological inventory:** Look closely at all the organisms you can find growing in a square meter and sketch each one. A magnifying lens will help you to see and appreciate the smallest of

inhabitants. Take it a step further, and compare different microhabitats—a tree trunk, creek bed, tide pool, forest floor, grassy meadow.

- **Observe over time:** You can find examples of different stages of a plant or animal's life cycle over a season and keep all the sketches on one page, or sometimes you can find them all at once by looking carefully in the habitat you are visiting. For example, you may find the egg masses of frogs, as well as polliwogs and adults in the same pond and adjoining meadow. Or follow the life of a species over a period of time to document any changes in behavior and form—the mating and nesting season of a pair of backyard robins, the sprouting, flowering and fruiting of a spring wildflower, the lifecycle of a butterfly from egg to caterpillar, chrysalis to winged adult.
- **Look for patterns and textures in nature:** the Fibonacci spiral pattern in a pine cone or seashell, the jigsaw puzzle pieces of ponderosa pine bark, the unique shapes of leaves caused by age, sunlight, insect chewing and deer browsing.
- **Sketch the non-living:** a summer thunderstorm, lenticular clouds, rainbows, the multihued layers of sedimentary rock in a desert, waves and waterfalls, the purple-hued snow of a late afternoon in winter, dew drops on a leaf reflecting the summer sky, cast shadows in an aspen gallery, craters of the moon. There's no end to the variety of phenomena you can sketch in nature if you look closely enough!
- **Sketch at night:** Yes! Go outside with a headlamp and sketch the moon (even better if you have binoculars, or if it's an eclipse). Listen carefully for nocturnal animals like yipping coyotes, hooting owls and croaking frogs. Some plants are at their best, and most fragrant, at night. Seek out or consider planting night-blooming tropical garden ornamental species that attract bats and moths as their pollinators, such as *Brugmansia* (Angel's trumpet). In Victorian England, it was popular to plant night-blooming gardens and saunter through them, inhaling the sweet scents of their nectars. Cactus, jasmine, tuberose, and the aptly named evening primrose and moonflower are evening bloomers as well. Search for insects and arachnids too—a [UV blacklight flashlight](#) can help you find glow-in-the-dark scorpions; super fun to do with kids! Other species emit their own bioluminescence, like fireflies (actually a type of beetle). Even a few North American mushrooms put off a glowing



green light after dark. And don't forget to look up at the sky! If you have binoculars or a telescope, all the better. Get to know the constellations, sketch the craters of the moon, or plan to be outside during the next meteor showers or eclipse.



Animal tracks and signs to sketch: here's just a few of the many you can search for:

- Tracks made by insects, snakes, birds, and mammals; look in dust, mud, sand dunes and snow
- Owl pellets (that you can dissect and find complete skeletons of mice, moles, shrews)
- Slime tracks from snails and slugs, exoskeletons of cicadas and stoneflies
- Antlion funnels and the ants they so cleverly trap, paper wasp nests
- Shed skins of snakes, cast off feathers of birds
- Check tree trunks for fur, antler velvet, claw marks of bear, wolf and mountain lion, chew marks from beavers and porcupines
- Search the tops of logs and boulders under trees for a pile of the telltale cone scales from a squirrel's lunch
- Spider webs (which vary considerably in their design) and tunnels of trap door spiders
- Wallows of collared peccaries, bedded down grass beds of elk, eskers of pocket gophers, runs of otters, food caches of pikas, burrows of seaside crabs
- Nests and middens of woodrats, mounds of termites
- Nests of birds; from the mud-lined robin's nest and the mud-formed swallow's nest to the minute nests of hummingbirds made of lichen and strengthened with spider's web
- Beaver dams and lodges, and the trees they've felled food and shelter

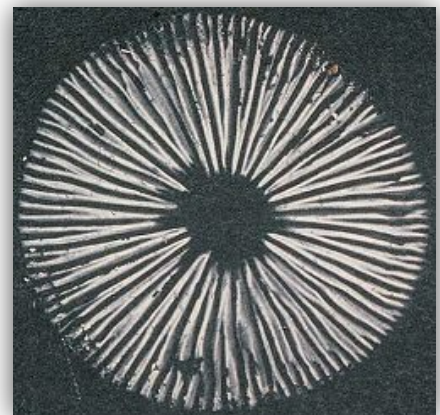


- Insect galls; each type of gall insect (tiny mites, midges, aphids or wasps) specialize in infecting certain host plants, and the galls they produce are often colorful, resembling the plants' fruits or flowers!
- Skulls and bones (and notice any gnaw marks made by mineral hungry rodents)
- Signs of woodpeckers – the sap wells of sapsuckers, the acorns stashed in oak trees by acorn woodpeckers, excavated nest cavities in tree trunks and the subsequent piles of bark chips at the base of the tree
- Galleries under the bark of downed logs made by ants, beetles, termites (many are quite intricate)
- Scat (easily identifiable to species with a guide book)

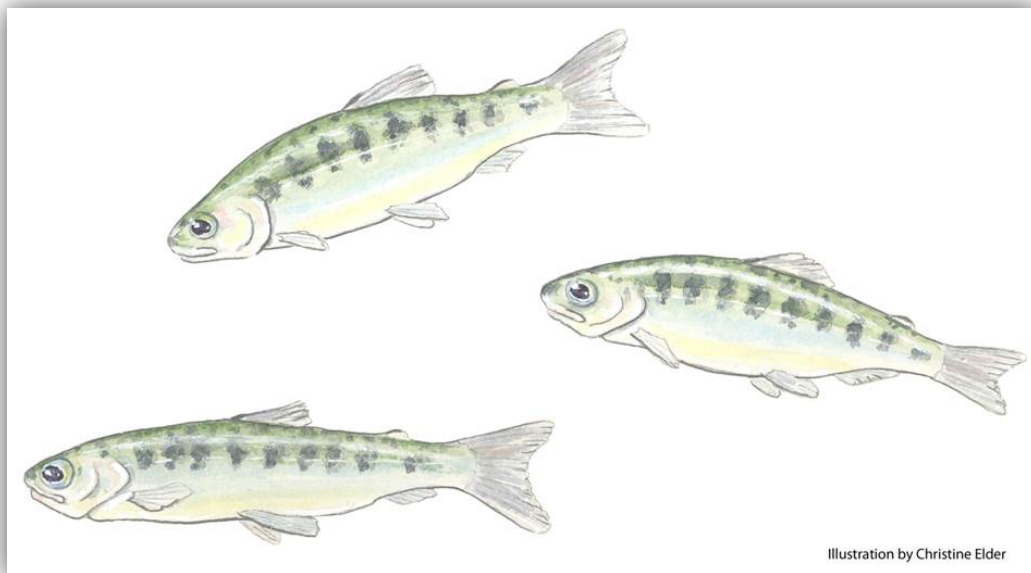


Ideas for sketching through the seasons

- **Spring:** watch for the first wildflowers to pop, the migrating birds to return. This is the best time of year for waterfalls and big waves on lakes and at the beach.
- **Summer:** Birds are busy building nests and courting. Insects are everywhere—dragonflies patrolling a section of river, carpenter bees excavating cavities in old wood, butterflies nectaring on flowers. Watch the skies for interesting summer thunderstorm clouds and rainbows.
- **Autumn:** draw the multicolored leaves of deciduous trees, visit a pumpkin patch or draw decorative gourds. Look for mushrooms emerging from the forest duff, starting a few days after the first rains of the season. It is fun to make spore prints from mushroom caps too. Learn how on my [website](#).



- Go to your county fair. I was lucky growing up to attend the fair voted the most beautiful in the state. You may find displays of award-winning vegetables and flower arrangements or a variety of farm animals raised by the local 4-H kids.
- **Winter:** draw snow and icicles, the silhouettes of deciduous trees and their long shadows. Visit a Christmas tree farm. If you live near the beach, watch the tide tables for the King Tides. The lowest tides of the year are generally in early January and yield rare access to tide pools. Be careful though, their invertebrate inhabitants are delicate and falling on slippery rocks is a real risk.
- **Any time of year:** watch your local news for announcements of birding festivals, orchid shows, self-guided garden tours, nature exhibits, dog & horse shows, family events and petting zoos.



PLACES TO PRACTICE FIELD SKETCHING

Go outside and practice finding and sketching some of the things mentioned above in your backyard, local park, forest reserve or public beach. You might also try a school yard, college campus, farms and ranches (think chickens, turkeys, goats and cattle). A foot bridge over a local river might yield waterfowl, beaver, muskrat, otter or migrating salmon (we are lucky in Oregon to have seen all of these!)

The local dog park is a great place to sketch this common mammal in all its myriad shapes, sizes and behaviors! Even cemeteries (especially historic, pioneer cemeteries) can be great places to find solitude and wildlife to draw (even if it's just the many species of moss and lichen that populate old gravestones.) Even the city dump can be a surprisingly productive place to sketch, with myriad circling gulls and crows.

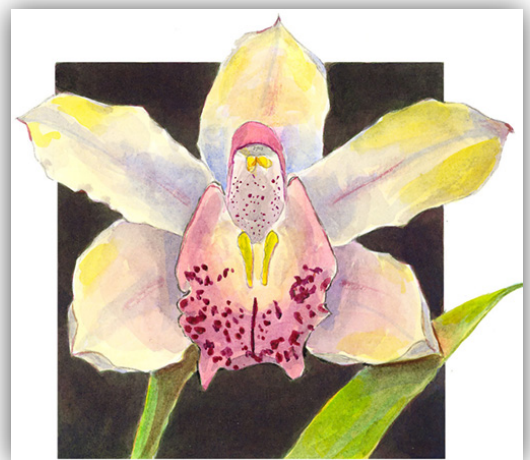
Try visiting sites at different times of day and in different seasons. You'll be amazed at how much this can make a difference in the wildlife present and the types of plants in bloom!

If you have a backyard, consider adding some wildlife friendly elements (water, shelter, food, and nesting materials) that will draw animals in and make it more convenient for you to sketch them next season. Check out the [National Wildlife Foundation's](#) website for ideas.



Sketching at home

If the weather is unsuitable or you just can't get away for long, there are plenty of things you can find to sketch at home. Practice 'field sketching' the plants in your house, make a still life arrangement of fruits or flowers, seek out those tiny animals that share your home and look at them under a magnifying lens (ants, house centipedes, daddy longlegs, jumping spiders). If you're lucky enough to have access to a dissecting or compound microscope, you might even venture to look at dust bunnies or your dog's fur for mites, ticks and other 'creepy' stuff!



Check your garden for critters you could bring inside to observe in a Mason jar—a cricket, earthworm, or praying mantis. Sketch from magazine photographs and from online videos to practice drawing moving animals. The [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) has a great collection of live nest cams and bird feeding stations that are excellent for this activity.

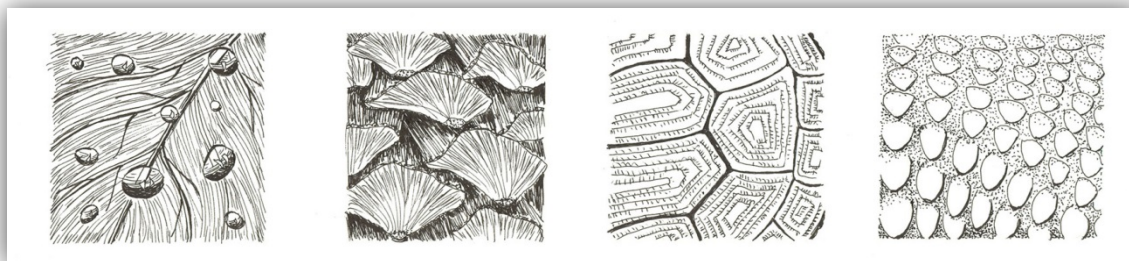
Make a cabinet of curiosities

Start a habit of collecting natural items to practice sketching at home on a rainy day or when you just can't make the time to get outdoors. Having a collection of feathers, bones, shells, seed pods, dried flowers, and the like, to sketch will help to encourage a daily sketching habit, which will quickly improve your skills. You can also purchase preserved and living specimens to sketch from such biological supply companies as [Carolina](#) or [Nasco](#).



Sketching at other indoor locales

If you have cabin fever or the weather is inhospitable, try sketching at a local aquarium, zoo, arboretum, pet store or wildlife rehabilitation center. Visit a local natural history museum or the science department of a college campus and you may find taxidermied specimens and mineral collections that can entertain you for hours. Visit a planetarium and sketch the planets and constellations—the sky's limit (pardon the pun!) Sit at a local café that has a nice view and sketch the scene out the window as you enjoy a pastry and cappuccino (or a green juice if that's how you roll.) You might also consider driving to a scenic overlook and just sketching from the warmth and comfort of your car (perhaps, clean your windows first) with a thermos of hot chocolate.



A note of caution

Common sense says be cautious in touching plants and animals you don't know – especially in exotic habitats you haven't visited before. Poison oak and ivy can cause skin reactions, certain amphibians and reptiles have noxious chemicals on their skin or may bite you, insects can sting, and some mammals carry disease. Be cautious of poking around in crevices, holes in the ground or tree cavities—I once had a swarm of angry bees chase me away from their nest in the ground that I had unceremoniously poked a stick in to! It is best to become familiar with the organisms in the areas you visit, and know which ones can harm you. Do not eat anything you have not positively identified, especially a mushroom, which can be very difficult to identify to species.

It's not a bad idea to get first aid certified either. [The American Red Cross](#) offers many classes at convenient times around the country.



Stewardship

It should go without saying, that when you're in the great outdoors, respect it and its inhabitants. Don't collect living organisms (or even ones you think are dead —I once was given a hermit crab that had inadvertently been collected from a Jamaican beach, thinking it was just an empty seashell!) If you need to relieve yourself in the outdoors, please don't leave toilet paper, and bury your #2 as deep as possible. Don't feed the wildlife, especially rodents that may carry the plague. Take only photos and leave only footprints as the adage goes.



Art, Field and Clothing Supplies

Art Supply Recommendations

Visit this [page](#) * on my website to see and download my list of recommended art supplies, as well as to view a 30 minute demo video on the basics of using each tool. Although I include quite a few items on this list, all you *really* need is something sturdy to sketch in (a book or clipboard & paper) and something to sketch with (I suggest a mechanical pencil and a waterproof pen.) (*<http://christineelder.com/top-art-tools>)



Field Supply Recommendations

Depending upon how far afield you are venturing, your budget, and long term goals for sketching, you may consider bringing the following with you on your next outdoor adventure:

- Binoculars, magnifying lens, field guides to the local flora and fauna, a small camera or smartphone. If you are really serious about comfort, try a foldable field chair (for example: [Crazy Creek chair](#) or [Tripod chair](#)), although I've never used one, some folks swear by them. If you become really serious about field sketching, you might consider getting a spotting scope and tripod (which would run you around a grand for a quality set!)
- Bringing water, snacks, first aid, sun screen and bug spray is always a good idea.
- If you are venturing more than a mile from a road, and especially if you are traveling alone, you might also consider emergency supplies such as fire-starting gear, a flashlight, a jacket, pepper spray and a whistle. Don't rely solely on your smartphone to rescue you if you break your ankle!
- Throw all your supplies into an across-the-shoulder bike messenger style of bag and/or fanny pack. I personally use a [Baggalini](#) brand bag that is lightweight and relatively waterproof. Try to keep your artist's bag at the door or in your car so you'll never regret being without it when there's a cool wildlife sighting.



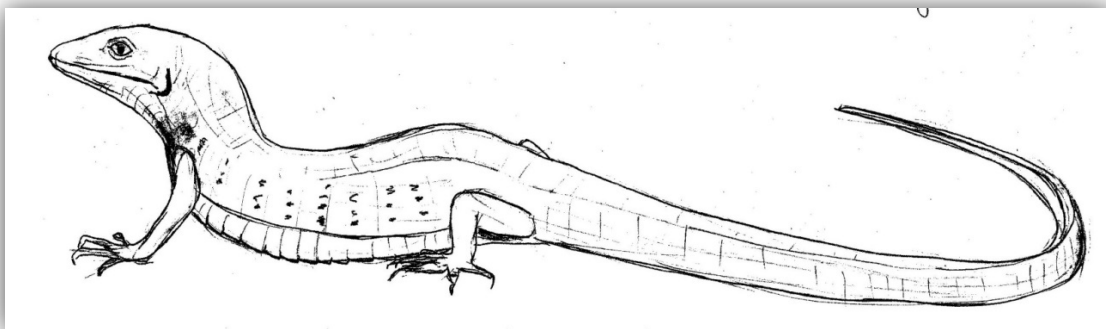
Clothing Recommendations

If you are simply sketching in your backyard or a local park, wear whatever is most comfortable for you. However, if you plan longer, all day hikes into the wilderness, or plan to sketch while traveling, I have some specific recommendations for you. I travel extensively for enjoyment and also as part of my work co-leading bird watching tours all over the western hemisphere in both cold and hot climates, so I am serious about my clothes – they must be durable and versatile.

We primarily stick with [Patagonia](#) and [REI](#). Royal Robbins is also an excellent choice (especially their [heritage styles](#) line). Whatever company or brand you choose, the ideal clothing incorporates performance blend/synthetic fabrics that wick away moisture, dry quickly, resist wrinkles, are light weight, stretch, and have sun and insect-protection qualities. No cottons or wools! Modern synthetic fibers are the way to go. Preferably use long-sleeved shirts and long pants for protection against bugs, scratches, and sun. Layers are advised for a long day in the field with changeable weather.

We like clothes with flexible styles – like zip off pant legs, lots of big pockets with zippers or buttons, sleeves and legs that can be rolled up and secured, etc. Fabrics with subtle patterns that hide stains are also a plus and reduce laundry time.

As for women’s clothes, I prefer the more practical skort over a skirt, and dresses that use stretchable blend fabrics (these I use for sketching while traveling to historic, archeological and religious sites, especially if there won’t be a chance to change before going out to dinner.)



Here's my list of what I recommend to wear, from head to toe

- Wide brimmed hat
- High quality sunglasses with large lenses
- Handkerchief (used for a wide variety of things including as a hat or headband, around the neck, as a mouth screen against dust or insects, or around the wrist. You can dip it in water for a cooling effect, to clean your art supplies or as a food napkin. So versatile!)
- Short sleeved shirt, as an under layer
- Long sleeved shirt with pockets that close, as an outer layer
- Long pants, perhaps with zip off legs, with large pockets that close
- Shoes that are sturdy but lightweight for hiking, water resistant, and high topped to protect your ankles

- **For hot weather consider:**
 - A [neck cooler](#) filled with cooling polymer crystals
 - A [Buff](#) (it's an all-in-one bandana, ponytail holder, sun guard, scarf, hat, neck gaiter, and dust screen)
 - A [mosquito headnet](#), jacket and/or pants (depending upon how much these little critters annoy you!)

- **For cool weather consider:**
 - Warmer clothes overall, perhaps with water resistance
 - Warm beanie, neck gaiter, ear warming headband
 - Fingerless gloves or lightweight flexible gloves to allow dexterity for sketching
 - And to keep your hands extra warm for sketching, try some [hand-warming packs](#)!
 - Windbreaker/rain jacket



Further Reading about Field Sketching and Journaling

[Illustrating Nature: Right-Brain Art in a Left-Brain World](#) by Irene Brady

[Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You](#) by Clare Walker Leslie

[How to Keep a Naturalist's Notebook](#) by Susan Leigh Tomlinson

[The Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature](#) by Cathy Johnson

[A LIFE IN HAND: Creating the Illuminated Journal](#) by Hannah Hinchman

[Opening the World through Nature; Journaling Integrating art, science, and language arts](#) by the California Native Plant Society



About the Author

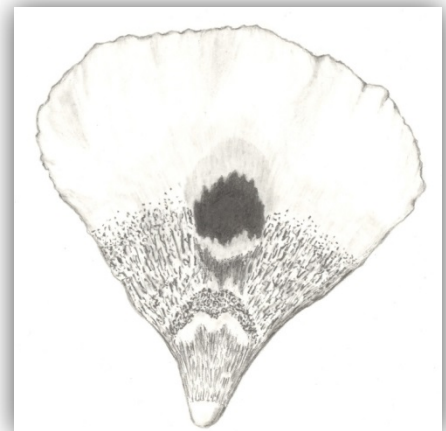
I feel so lucky to be able to combine my two passions: art and nature.

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!



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

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

5) Connect on social media



Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/christine.elder.547?fref=photo>

Twitter/Periscope: @AWildNaturalist

Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thateldergirl/>

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Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my partner in life, love and travel, Stephen Shunk, who believes in me and my mission, and all my art teachers including Dolores Jordan, my high school art teacher, who is still a close friend and practicing artist!

Christine Elder, Bend, Oregon
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