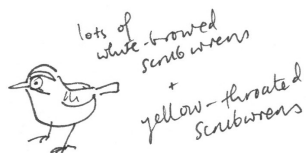




# Make a Date with Nature

An introduction to Nature Journaling

By Paula Peeters

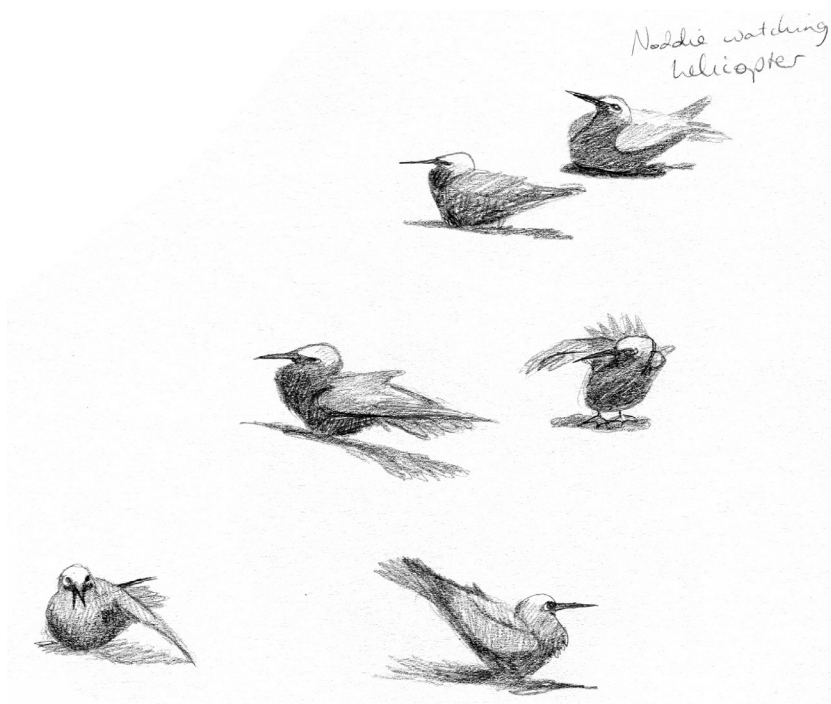




# Make a Date with Nature

## An introduction to nature journaling

Written and Illustrated by Paula Peeters





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PO Box 242, Sandgate QLD 4017, Australia

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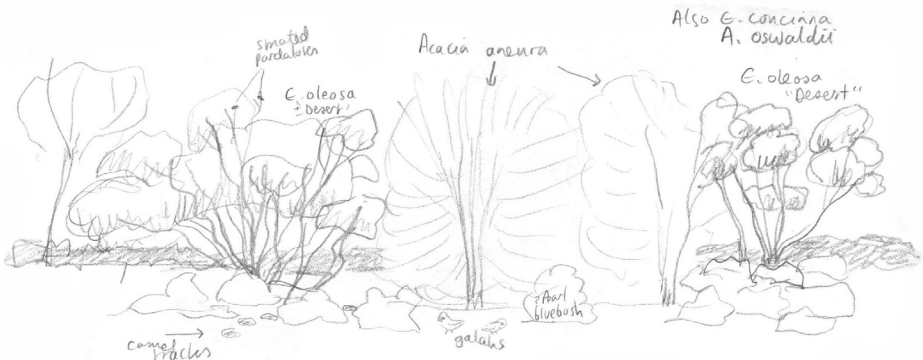
## What is nature journaling?

Nature journaling is the practice of drawing or writing in response to nature. This fun, relaxing practice helps you to connect more closely with nature, and results in the creation of your own unique nature journal. Both the practice and the end product are important.

The practice calms your mind, and increases your attention to detail and appreciation of beauty. It improves your recognition of different animal and plant species, and your understanding of where and how they live. With time, it also improves your ability to observe, to draw and to write.

A journal allows you to capture the moment (a sunset, a view, a critter, a flower, a fungus...), and recall observations which would otherwise be forgotten. The entries in your journal can give you inspiration for other creative projects, such as writing, painting, textiles, music, other crafts... the opportunities are endless. A nature journal can also be used to compile species sightings and other more scientific observations that are of great value to citizen science projects.

A journal can be anything you want it to be. Mine ranges from the personal to the scientific, from records of facts and realistic images to imagined beasts, scenes and stories. And many things in between.





Nature journals can contain carefully composed pages and finely-wrought, detailed pictures, painted with true-to-life colours. But sketches from memory – in words or pictures – can capture the essence of something, or perhaps what it means to you, far more truthfully than a carefully observed transcription at the time.

It's up to you how sketchy or finished, how true-to-life or drawn-from-memory your nature journaling will be. Perhaps an eclectic mixture of many things and approaches, each reflecting your mood at the time?

But a journal should never be an onerous chore, one that you feel under pressure to complete every day, or that you feel needs to contain only perfect pictures or writing. That's not a journal, that's a rod for your back.

A journal should be a playful, helpful, adventurous, extension of yourself. A sandpit for exploring your responses to the world. Something a bit frowsy, a bit lop-sided, a bit ramshackle at times. But at other times it will resonate with a rare quality. It might be beauty, it might be insight, it might be as simple as two lines that perfectly capture the bird you glimpsed flying by. But you will catch your breath, and be quietly amazed at what you've created. That sentence or story or picture will be yours: your unique response to the world.





## Why do it?

Nature journaling allows you to spend time in nature, just sitting or standing quietly, and *being*. It's an antidote to our busy, technology-infested lives.

Spending quiet time in nature is good for our physical and mental health. As the world becomes crowded, and more people are living in urban areas, we are also becoming less connected to nature. This disconnect probably contributes to increasing levels of anxiety and depression in human society. The simple practice of nature journaling can help us to reconnect with nature, and remind us of the resilient and beautiful life that is part of our world, and part of us too.

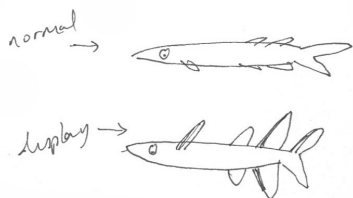
When you are quiet and still, the animals become less scared, and they forget that you are there. Often you will get to observe animal behaviour that most people don't get to see, because those people are too fast, too noisy, or are distracted by something else.

The natural world is always in a state of flux, but right now it's changing faster than ever. A changing climate and increasing pressures exerted by people are having all sorts of effects on species and ecosystems. Paying attention to what's happening around us is important. Nature journaling can help us to record what's changing and what's staying the same.

People everywhere are also working hard to restore ecosystems and nurture what's left. Nature journaling is a great way to record this positive progress, as well as plan future restoration projects.



*Nikofagus  
codonandra*



## How I started nature journaling

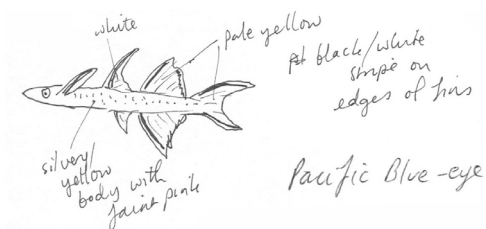
When I was 13 years old, my enlightened young English teacher encouraged our whole class to keep a journal. She also pioneered perhaps the very first bush camping trip at our rather risk-averse Catholic girls school. Both left a large impression on me. I was fortunate to be already well in love with 'the bush' through regular camping trips with my family. But the journal idea was new.

Since that time, I've kept an intermittent journal. It spans a wide range of scruffy exercise books, notebooks and sketchbooks of various shapes and sizes. Progress through each book is seldom linear - I've tended to jump around a bit, grabbing a notebook to take on a field trip at the last moment, and not adding more until years later.

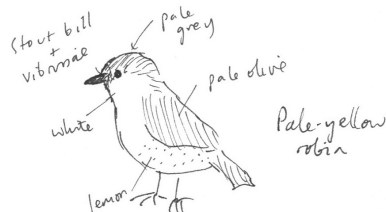
What started as a mostly written journal was slowly invaded by drawings. Tiny doodles in the margins were joined by very basic shapes of birds, and plants, with markings and colours noted, for later identification. Every now and then, between the writing, a landscape was scrawled in ballpoint pen. Or a line-drawing of a leaf appeared - one that I'd taken time to complete - astonishingly life-like.

You see, as a teenager, I chose to follow an education in science and left my art classes behind. It took a while for the drawings to re-enter my life, but they eventually returned. With a shy, but surprisingly powerful insistence. Now I don't think I could stop them, even if I wanted to.

And why a *nature* journal? Well, nature is such an integral part of my life, that's a bit like asking "Why breathe?" Or "Why eat?" !







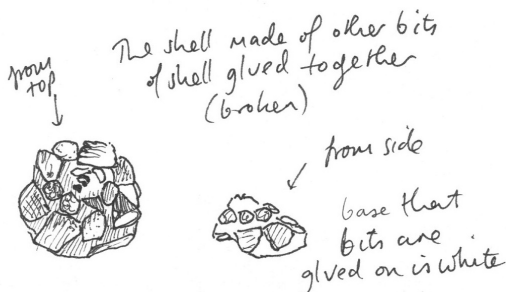
## Getting started

### Seeing – the key to everything

It all starts with paying attention to things. Really looking. Often we need to slow down to do this. Put away distractions like tablets and mobile phones. Forget about telling everyone what a great time we're having. And forget about 'goals'.

The first thing many walkers check out when they arrive at a trailhead is a sign that lists the walks. Where are we going today? What will we see? How long will it take to get there? (and more athletic walkers might be asking themselves - Can I beat this time?). Walk half an hour, and you'll get to the waterfall. Walk 4 hours and you'll get to the top of the mountain.

I like a good walk as much as anyone, but there are so many other ways to interact with nature. Setting a time/distance goal at the start of your walk is a good safety practice but it tends to make you keep moving until you reach your destination. And then on the return journey, your target is the start of the walk, the carpark, maybe you're thinking about what's for dinner, or work or school the next day. At the end you'll feel a satisfied tiredness in your body and the achievement of walking 2 km, 12 km, 20 km, whatever. And you saw the waterfall! You climbed the mountain! You got back in time for the next scheduled activity!





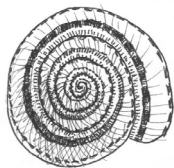
But what did you see?

I mean, what did you *really* see?

You may have seen a lot more by just wandering much more slowly down the same track for half the distance, and paying attention to the varied life all around. If you stopped to sketch something, or write down your impressions, your journey would have been rich and detailed indeed. And for a short time, you might have lost yourself in the place and all around you, and forgotten about yourself and your worries for a while. This kind of experience can be a rare treasure in our time-pressured, goal-oriented, mobile-phone-saturated lives.

I find walks very good for thinking, for mulling over ideas in my head. But unfortunately, if I'm worried or anxious, long walks can also be taken over by endless worrying and constant chewing on the same problem, or negative thoughts. All the way up the mountain and back again, for hours, if you're not careful. In this state, you don't see the scenery, you don't see much at all. You are trapped in your own head, and may as well be at home.

In a similar, but more pleasant way, walks can be great for catching up with friends, for chatting as you go. And of course this is fine - a lovely way to spend a day. But you won't see much nature unless a creature sprawls itself over the path in front of you; or a leech attaches to your leg, or a particularly bright something catches your eye. You'll remain caught up in the 'me' and in the conversation with your friends.



keeled fruit  
of the  
looking-glass  
mangrove

Heritiera littoralis

The first step for truly engaging with nature is an alert attentiveness. This is the opposite to the brain / ego pushing you towards a goal. Or being caught up in your own thoughts. Or distracted by other people, mobile phones, music, etc.

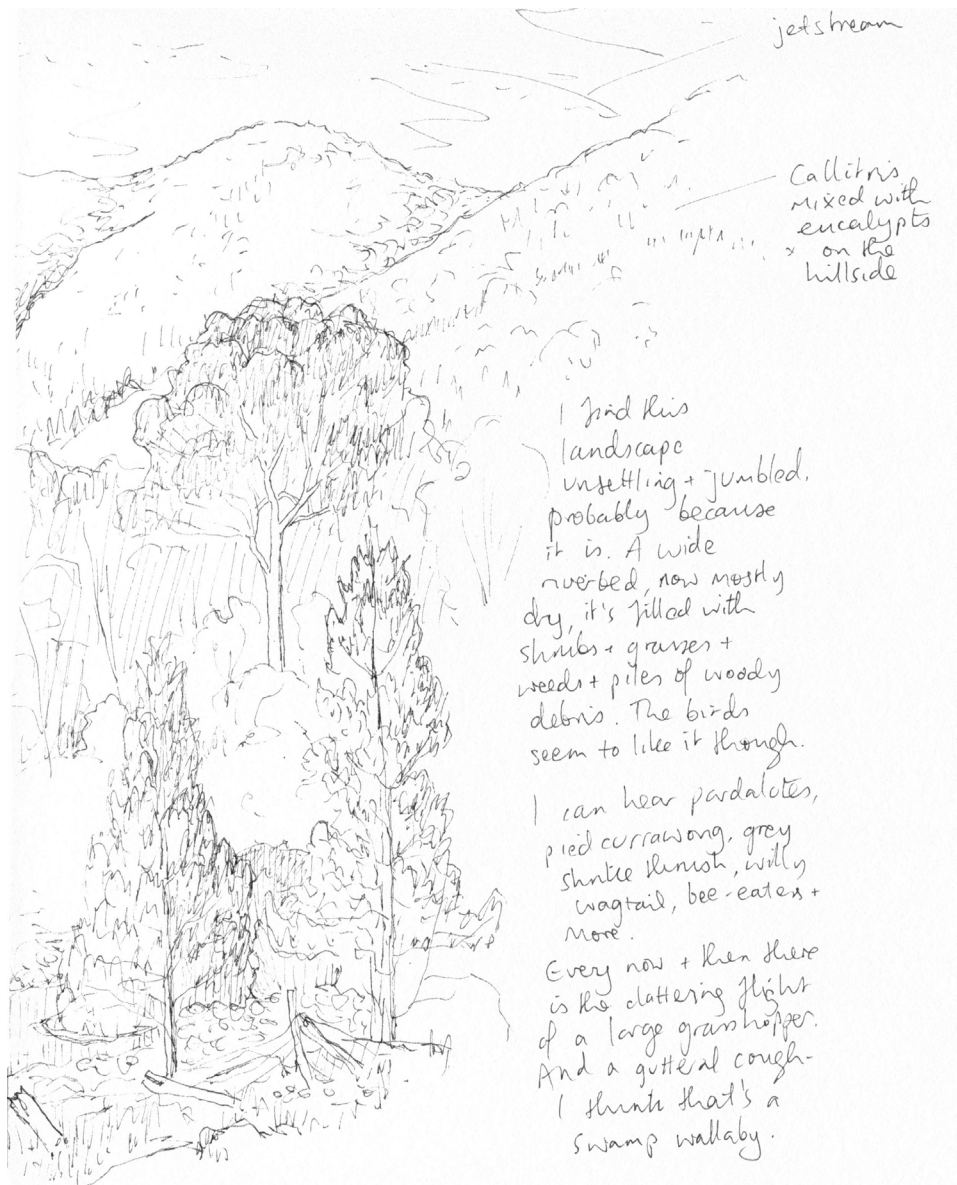
Imagine that instead of climbing to the top of the mountain, you got halfway there and then became fascinated by a pair of nesting birds, or a colourful arrangement of wildflowers, or a stunning view over the valley. And you said to yourself (and your companions): I'm going to stop here and just become immersed in this for a while. I won't get to the top of the mountain, but I'll go on my own journey, and create my own unique response. I'll sit and look closely. I might do a little sketch, or jot down some words.

That small time of alert attentiveness may well be the most memorable part of the day. If you did something creative as part of it, you will probably treasure those memories forever. While the view from the top of the mountain is likely to be fleeting, and soon forgotten.



Oolambeyan NP 26/2/16

*Callitris glaucoxylla*  
at sunset



jetstream

Callitris  
mixed with  
eucalypts  
on the  
hillside

I find this  
landscape  
unsettling + jumbled,  
probably because  
it is. A wide  
riverbed, now mostly  
dry, it's filled with  
shrubs + grasses +  
weeds + piles of woody  
debris. The birds  
seem to like it though.

I can hear pardalotes,  
pied currawong, grey  
shrike thrush, willy  
wagtail, bee-eaters +  
more.

Every now + then there  
is the clattering flight  
of a large grasshopper.  
And a guttural cough-  
I think that's a  
swamp wallaby.

Sundown NP, near The Broadwater  
Campground 3/3/2016



The Bluff  
from Encounter  
Bay  
Oct 96





## **Anyone can draw, anyone can write**

The ability to draw and to write is not some gift that certain people have and others don't. These are skills that anyone can learn, just like many other skills that are learnt, such as riding a bicycle, or reading.

We assume that most people can be taught to ride a bicycle, or read, if they are given appropriate instruction and the opportunity to practice. Drawing and writing are skills just like these. But for some reason many people think they are impossible to learn. This is simply not true.

Anyone can draw.

Anyone can write.

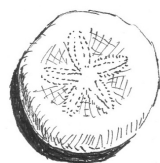
If you can sign your name, you can learn how to draw.

If you can communicate in at least one language, you can learn how to write.

The trouble is, most of us have a voice in our head telling us it can't be done. But you need to ignore that voice, and just try.

Many of us are also far too impatient with ourselves. We expect fantastic results straight away. We don't give ourselves time to play, experiment, and have fun practicing.

Through practice, you will be able to both draw and write, and create pictures and sentences that will surprise and please you.



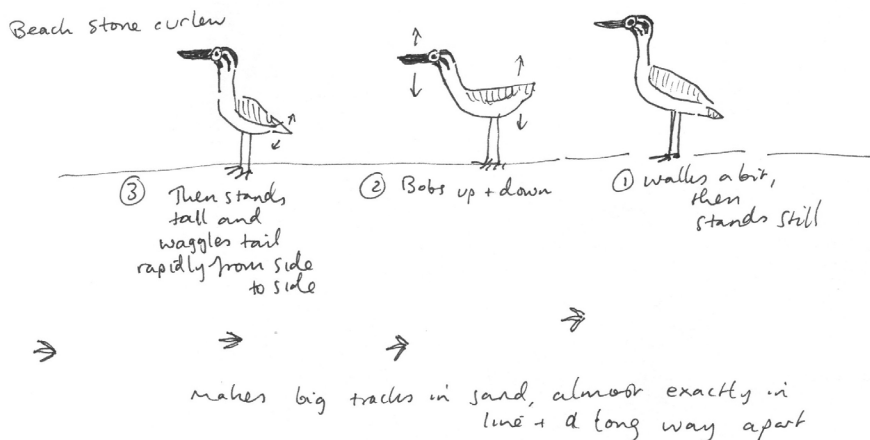
*Sand dollar*

## Warm-up exercises

Sometimes it can be hard to get started with journaling. Especially when faced with a blank page. Or you've had to plan and rush around madly so that you can now allow yourself a small, blessed hour to do something creative. You get up early, have a quick breakfast, do more chores, make sure everything else (everyone else?) is happy and can cope without you for a short time. You drive through traffic to get to a natural place, find a park, get to a promising spot. And then you pause... it might be the first time you've just sat down quietly, without distractions, for the whole morning, maybe the whole week, or maybe even much longer.

Suddenly you are at a loss, and in the strange stillness you're asking yourself: What should I do? How do I start? What should I look at? You may also be telling yourself - cruelly and unfairly - I can't draw, I can't write, why am I even bothering to do this?

Don't panic. Be kind to yourself. Here are some simple but effective warm-up exercises to help you find your groove.



## ***Warm-up exercises for awareness and drawing:***

Materials: pencil or pen, and paper (unlined is best)

For each exercise it can be helpful to first get comfortable in the position you'll be drawing in (sitting or standing). Then close your eyes for a few minutes and concentrate on breathing slowly and evenly. This helps you to slow down, relax, and focus on the task at hand.

### **a. Contour drawing**

This is one of the best exercises to improve your powers of observation. Be warned: your drawing will *not* look like the subject. The aim of this exercise is to get you to *look closely* at what you are drawing. This is the first, crucial step in learning how to draw.

Go out in nature and find something to draw that won't move. A leaf is good. Or a flower. If you're in an open area and can view a whole tree, that's a good place to start too.

After pausing, with eyes closed, for a few minutes (see above), open your eyes and look closely at your subject. Then place your pen or pencil on the paper and begin to draw. **Do not look at your drawing on the paper. Do not lift your pencil or pen off the paper.** Draw every detail you can see.

For example: If you are drawing a leaf, follow the outline of the leaf, including any little teeth or lobes or nibbles something has taken out of the leaf. Also draw the veins, including every little vein you can see, and also any little blemishes or spots or folds.

Take your time. Go slowly. Don't look at your drawing until you are done.

When you've finished, you will have produced a 'contour drawing'. It won't look much like the subject, but a contour drawing contains its own special beauty. It's a record of all the fine details you observed in whatever you were drawing. Most people discover many little details they never noticed before. Once you are able to *see* these details, then you can set about drawing them.



Contour drawing of  
Callioma leaf +  
fruit 17/4/16

## **b. Colour mapping**

Go out in nature and find something that you can observe closely. A leaf, a tree trunk, a shell, or a fruit are good subjects. Then try to find at least 5 to 10 different colours in it.

Write down descriptions of these colours, and be specific. e.g. olive-green, reddish brown, pale blue.

You can also draw a simple sketch of the object (just in pen or pencil), and label on the sketch where those colours can be found.

This is a good exercise to get past the pre-conceived ideas such as 'a leaf is green' or 'a tree trunk is brown'. We often learn these stereotypes in our childhood, and just assume them without really looking. By looking closely, you will discover all sorts of new colours and details in everyday things.

A simple sketch of something, with notes about its different colours and markings, can help with identification and can also be used to create a more detailed picture later on.

## **c. Listening**

Find a place in nature where you can sit or stand comfortably. Then close your eyes and listen for 5 minutes. Try to distinguish as many different sounds as possible. What direction are they coming from? Are they coming from nearby or far away?

Then open your eyes and write down all the sounds you have heard, and what was making them. Perhaps you noticed some sounds for the first time. Maybe you became more aware of a variety of things happening in the local surroundings. Or perhaps you were struck by the silence (lucky you!).

A friend of mine can identify every bird call he hears. When he goes camping, he can complete his bird list while dozing in his tent in the morning – without even getting up!

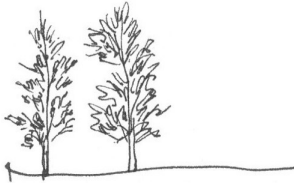




poplar box



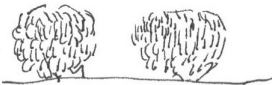
brigalow



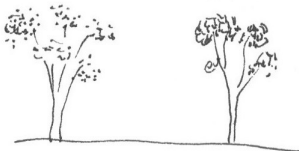
belah



*Eremophila mitchellii*



wilga



more poplar box



callitis

## ***Warmup exercises for writing:***

### **a. 5 minute writing**

Materials: Timer (e.g. a mobile phone alarm), pen or pencil, paper for writing

Good writing requires both imagination/creativity and critical/analytical thinking. Unfortunately, many of us get stopped by the critical 'editor' in our brains before we start. This exercise helps to free up your creative/imaginative side. You may not be aware of this, but your imagination is a bottomless well. You just need to learn how to tap into it.

Go to a natural place where you can sit somewhere for about half an hour without interruption. Take a bit of time just to sit quietly in your chosen place, taking in the what's around you, before you begin to write.

Set your timer for 5 minutes. Start your timer and write whatever comes into your head. Don't worry about spelling or punctuation. **Keep writing, do not stop until the timer sounds.** If you cannot think of anything, then write about that. Just keep going, no matter how silly or unformed you think your writing is.

When 5 minutes is up, read back over your writing. Find the part that you like the best – a phrase, a sentence, or the germ of an idea. Find a blank sheet of paper, and write this part on the top. Then set your timer and repeat the 5 minutes of writing once more.

Read over what you've written the second time. Once more, find a part you like the best, and use this as the start of a third 5 minute free writing exercise.

At the end of this exercise you will have created quite a lot of writing. You will probably have phrases, sentences and ideas that stand out, that capture something that you really like. Other parts may not work as well. Some people come up with some of the best writing they've ever done with this exercise – because they've managed to stop their internal editor from butting in, and their creative side has had a bit of freedom to do its thing.

Raw 'free-writing' can be included in a nature journal as is. Or you can select the bits that best describe the nature you're responding too. You can also use ideas and phrases from free writing to be the basis of poems or prose pieces that you develop further at a later date.

The most important thing to remember from this exercise is that your imagination, your creativity, is there within you. It's always there. There is no limit to the many and various ways you can respond to nature with writing. You just need to let those words come bubbling to the surface, and get them down on paper. The editing can happen later. Free writing is a simple tool that can help make this happen.

## **b. Find something that's....**

This exercise is good for observation skills and also helps you to engage imaginatively with nature.

Write the following list of words on a piece of paper as headings, leaving space next to and below each word for writing to be added later:

*big, small, hard, soft, furry, prickly, rough, smooth, simple, complex, humble, proud, shy, bold, quiet, loud*

(Add some of your own, if you like.)

Then when you're in a natural place, try to find things (plants, animals, rocks, water bodies, weather, landscape features...) that fit these words. Also write a sentence or two describing why each thing could be described by the word you've placed it next to.

## **c. Have a conversation**

Find something in a natural place: a plant, animal, landform, rock, object, dead thing. Then imagine you are having a conversation with this thing. Start off with questions – what would you ask it? How would it answer you? Write your conversation down.

Your conversation can be entirely fantastical, or it can try to uncover facts about the thing. It's up to you where you take it.

This exercise can help to engage your imagination, but it can also inspire you to do further research about your chosen subject. Simple questions like: 'What's your name?' 'How old are you?' 'How did you get here?' 'Why do you have long purple legs?' can lead to fascinating discoveries.



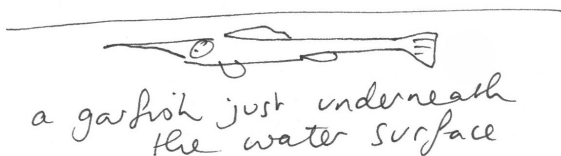
## Get curious

Another approach to nature journaling is to simply be inquisitive. Look around you, and ask questions of nature. What bird is that? What's the name of that flower? How old is that tree? Who made this path?

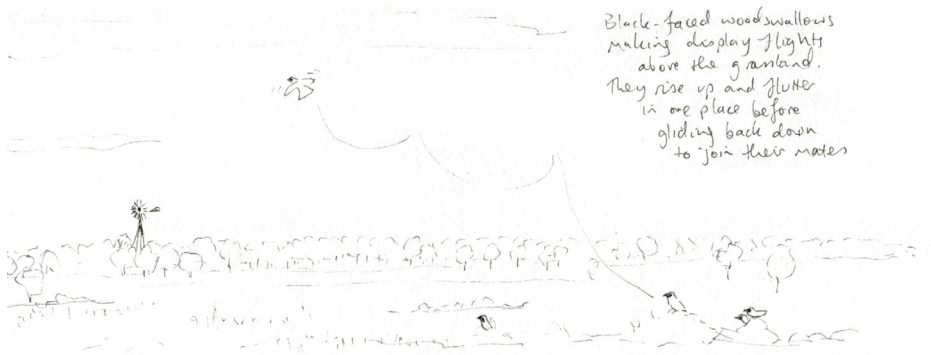
With careful observation (make notes and sketches) and a bit of research, you can probably answer many questions. Other questions will be harder to solve. Many questions about Australian nature remain unanswered, even today.

There is still much to discover about some of our most common native animals, plants and fungi. Basic information about behaviour, reproduction, diet, population size and distribution is scarce for many species. The complexities of ecology - how different species interact with each other and their habitats - can be even more of a mystery.

Getting curious is the first step in any discovery, and it is no coincidence that many famous scientists, inventors and explorers kept detailed journals of their observations and ideas. This is another reason why nature journaling is such a worthwhile and engaging pastime. Not only does observing and asking questions fire the intellect, but the records and discoveries thus made can make a real contribution to our understanding of the natural world.







Black-faced woodswallows  
making display flight  
above the grassland.  
They rise up and flutter  
in one place before  
gliding back down  
to join their mates



6/5/16  
Sycamore and  
Blackbutt at  
The Garry  
picnic ground.  
Comparison of branching patterns.

## Materials for nature journaling

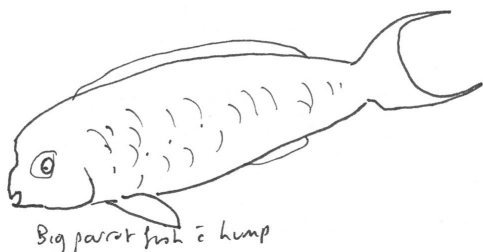
Nature journaling can be done with many different materials. My favourites at the moment are:

- **A good quality, spiral bound sketchbook of thick (190 gsm) mixed-media paper, with robust covers.** Spiral bound means that it can sit flat when open. Mixed media paper allows you to use pencils and pens, but also paint and watercolour pencil, without the paper buckling or marks showing through to the other side of the page.
- **Permanent ink fineliners.** I like sizes 0.05 and 0.1. Sketches made with these pens can be painted over later without the ink smudging.
- **2B graphite pencil and plastic eraser.** Simple, reliable and versatile.
- **Gouache paints in a portable, sealable plastic palette, and some fine brushes and a jar with water.** Gouache is a water-based paint that can be used as an opaque paint or watered down and used more like watercolour. The portable, sealable palette can be taken in a day-pack on a picnic or hike without the paint leaking or the colours mixing (much).
- **Water-soluble colour pencils** can be used dry as colour pencils, or be blended like watercolours if water is added.
- **A fine paintbrush with its own water tank.** This can be used to blend watercolour pencils, and is lighter/less bulky to take than a jar and extra water for dipping brushes.

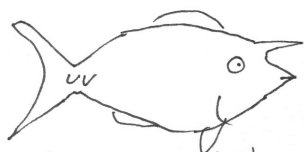


## Locations

Nature journaling can be done anywhere there is nature. This includes at the beach, at the rocky shore, among the mangroves, in the National Park or State Forest, and in the local park, schoolyard or playground. Zoos, wildlife parks, and farms. Agricultural shows. Lakes, ponds and waterways. But don't forget your own backyard or garden or courtyard. Botanic gardens are great places, as they combine more wild nature with specially-selected interesting plant forms.



Big parrot fish - hump



Unicorn tusk fish  
pale light brown-grey  
fluro light blue  
spikes on base of  
tail



Many  
large fish  
just hanging  
about  
under  
the  
jetty

## **Keeping it going**

Many of us have busy lives, and it can be hard to find time for nature journaling. Here are some ideas to help you keep going with this rewarding and worthwhile practice:

### **Make a date with nature**

You make dates for other important things in your life, so why not make a date with nature? Set aside a time every week, fortnight or month for you to get out in nature and do some nature journaling. Have fun planning where you will go and what materials you'll take. And snacks too. I find that a morning tea treat, and thermos of tea, enjoyed out in nature, is a great way to get my creative juices flowing....

### **Favorite place, tree, garden....**

Do you have a favorite place? It may be in your backyard, or it might be in a local park. It could be under a special tree or by a lake. Why not adopt that place as your own nature journaling site? Even if you go back to the same place each time, you will experience it in different seasons, different weather and with different light. The changes you record over time will tell their own fascinating story. If you record weather details, times, dates and species, this information can be very useful for citizen science projects too, like the Atlas of Living Australia.

### **Detailed study**

Maybe you are fascinated by a certain type of animal or plant? Or a certain habitat? You could use a nature journal to explore and research this subject, including your own observations, writing and drawings.

### **Travel journal**

Next time you go on a trip somewhere, take some journaling materials along with you. Time set aside for sketching or writing can be a much-needed respite from dashing from place to place to 'see the sights'. Your journal pages will capture precious memories that you'd

otherwise forget. And you are likely to engage with your subject in a more creative and personal way than you would by taking a quick photo.

## **Birding journal**

Many birders keep lists of species, but these records can be enhanced by more detailed notes and some sketching. If you are still learning to recognise new bird species, simple sketches of birds and notes about markings and colours, scribbled down when you see the bird, can be a great help. Once you get more familiar with birds it's very rewarding to write and sketch about their behaviours, what they eat, and the habitats where they are found. In this way, you can move beyond the names, and begin to get an insight into their lives and characters too.

## **Journal on a theme**

Perhaps you are most interested in pink things? Or seashells? Or plans for your vegetable garden? Themes like these, and many others, could be used as the basis of some very interesting nature journals.

## **Social media**

If you are into social media, it can be fun to share your nature journaling exploits with friends, and the wider world. It doesn't have to be a masterpiece. Lots of people share photos on social media, but there are not so many who share their own direct, creative response to nature. Have a go! If you are worried that other people may not 'get it', then seek out other people who are into nature journaling, or nature.



## Some further reading

Edwards, B. (2012) *Drawing on the right side of the brain*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin. New York.

Franck, F. (1973) *The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing as meditation*. Vintage Books, New York.

Leslie, C.W. and C.E. Roth (2000) *Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a whole new way of seeing the world around you*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Storey Publishing, North Adams.

Leslie, C.W.; Tallmadge, J. and T. Wessels (1996) *Into the field: A guide to locally focused teaching*. The Orion Society, Great Barrington.



## A conversation

Think of a nature journal as part of a conversation with nature. It's a fragment of your response.

When I'm out in nature, there's a whole lot of things clamouring for my attention, and most are completely silent. The rocks and earth itself speaks of millions of years, or the recent tales of land use. Often covered in a sward of grass, or a litter of leaves and twigs and dried gumnuts that chatter about their previous time in the sun, and crunch underfoot. The trees stretch up to the sky and describe their histories in the very shape of their trunks and branches: "See - this is where I was bent by the storm; this is the stump, it's all that's left of my first big branch; this is where the light was strongest when that cluster of branches began their journey". The birds are among the things that actually do call out, screech by, chortle softly, hidden high above, peep shrilly from the rank tall grass, or give echoing quacks from far out on the lake. And then there is the light itself - charging the whole scene with a mood, a splendour, perhaps close and mysterious if there's fog, but often ramping up into the bright gold or sun-bleached, hot, sunny, character of this land. The reptiles catch the eye in a rustle or a gleam. The frogs are usually silent, but can be noisy too, but mostly at night or if it rains. A dog barks somewhere, a currawong yodels from on high. All this crying out to my senses, filling the space, expanding out into the day. And what can I do in return? I see, I watch, I marvel. I take it all in. I walk slowly. I slow down. I take my journal out, pick up a pen. And reply. There are a myriad ways of responding, an enormous richness of shape and form and story and colour, all swirling around in my head. I am a blessed being, with all of these bounteous riches to bask in. There is no right or wrong. There is no-one else to impress. It's just me, having a conversation with nature. I pick up pen or brush, and begin.

*Sooty oystercatcher catching oysters!*





A nature journal should be a playful, helpful, adventurous, extension of yourself. A sandpit for exploring your responses to the world.

This little guidebook shows you how to get started with nature journaling and keep going with this fun and rewarding activity.

Paula Peeters is an artist, writer and ecologist based in Brisbane, Australia. See more of her work at [www.paperbarkwriter.com](http://www.paperbarkwriter.com)



## PAPERBARK WRITER

Australian nature meets science and art. By Paula Peeters



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