

# Nature Journal Ideas

With Examples from a Staff Member's Actual  
Journal



# What is a Nature Journal?

A nature journal is many things...a place to record your observations...to reflect on adventures...to draw...to be surprised. Your journal is a medium to engage with the outdoors...to make the ordinary extraordinary. Follow your interests. Even your dog in the backyard can be a good subject!



# Where Should I Start?

Obtain a sturdy, non-spiral-bound notebook with BLANK pages and a writing utensil.

Browse this slideshow for examples, tips, and guided journal entry ideas.

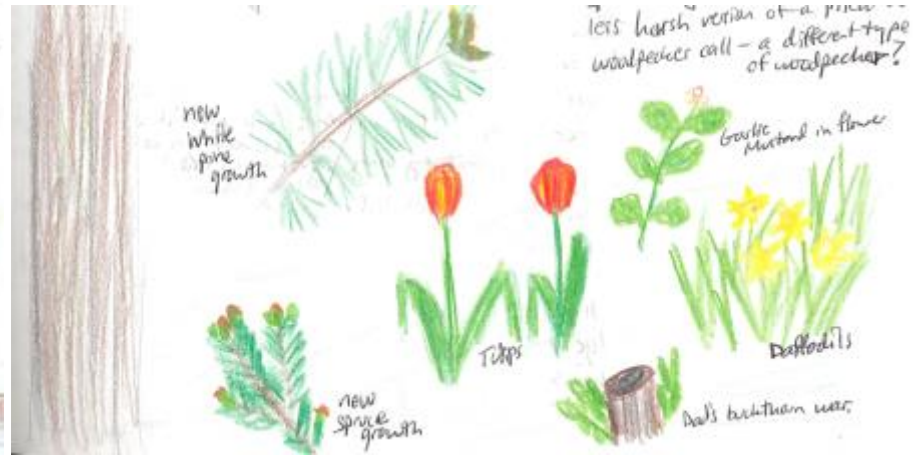
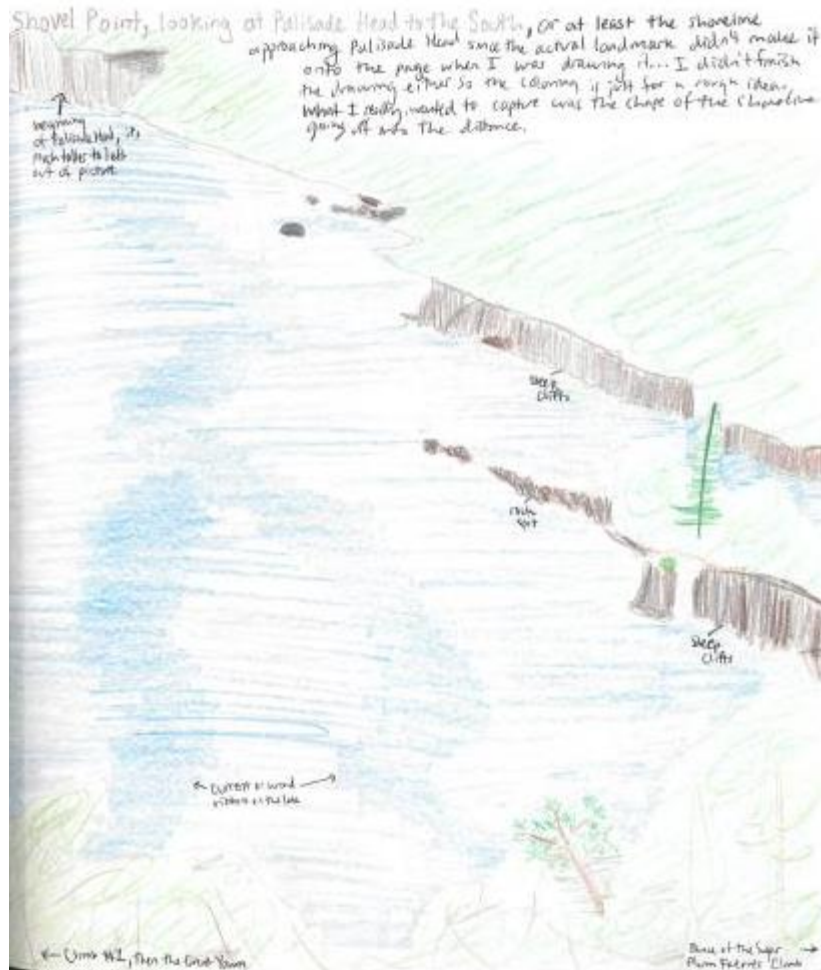
Start journaling. Keep journaling. Enjoy!

# Journaling Tip 1: Write About the Present Moment



If you don't know where to start, simply find a place to be and start writing.

# Journaling Tip 2: Draw What You See



For some people, drawing is easier. Why not try both?



# Journaling Tip 3: Drawings Need Not Be Perfect

Here is a drawing from  
the pictures Elsa took:

- Star-nosed mole (*Condylura cristata*)
- 22 fleshy appendages on nose
- swims underwater in winter, with tunnels often opening under ice
- eats mainly aquatic insects
- fur can be rubbed either way, an adaptation for burrowing
- large front claws, hidden eyes

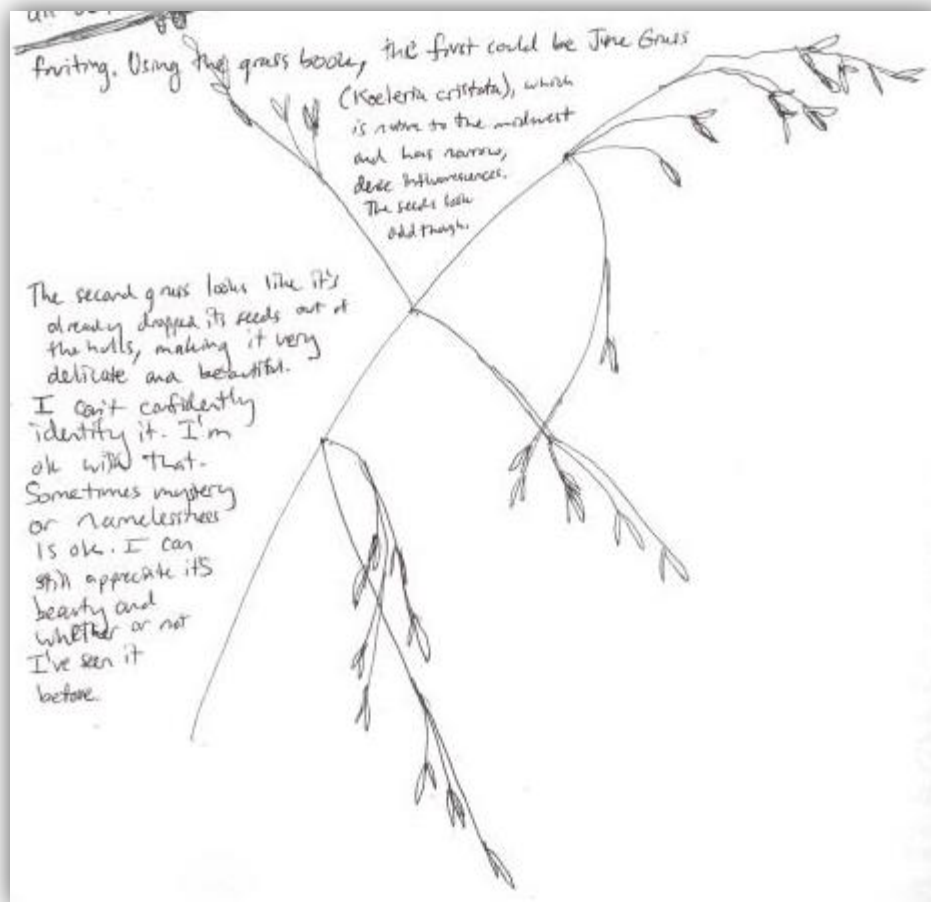
nose  
came out a  
bit large.



I've attempted to make the proportions  
correct. Our specimen was plump in appearance.  
I'm not sure of the actual size.

Don't worry about how "artistic" your drawings are. Focus instead on details and useful observations. Enjoy the process.

# Journaling Tip 4: Combine Writing and Drawing



Drawing will help you notice things more closely. Try to capture the essence of something with lines. Then give it some context in writing.

You can appreciate the beauty of the natural world without learning the name of every plant or animal.

# Journaling Tip 5: Use Your Senses



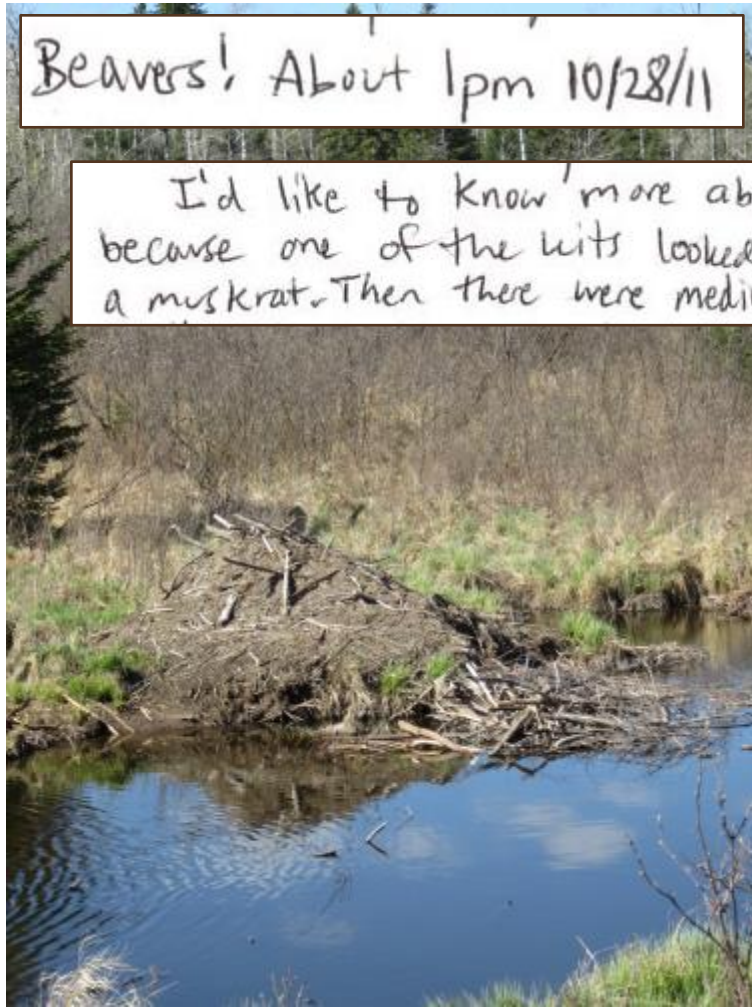
What do you see? Hear? Touch? Smell? Try focusing on your senses. Collect and paste a few natural samples in your journal.



# Journaling Tip 6: Wonder about Your Observations

Beavers! About 1pm 10/28/11

I'd like to know more about the social structure in this lodge because one of the kits looked so small I thought it could even be a muskrat. Then there were medium sized kits, and also more than two full-size



Start to ask and answer questions as you observe. What evidence could you use to test your possible explanations?

# Guided Journal Entry Ideas

The rest of the slideshow provides topic ideas to help you experiment and move beyond basic observation.

# Guided Entry 1: Observe a Spot Repeatedly

Try visiting the same spot over and over throughout the year. Take pictures to paste in your journal to capture the changes over time.







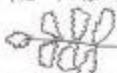
# Guided Entry 3: Analyze Egg Carton Objects

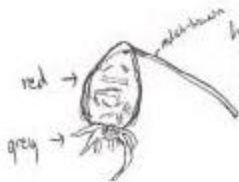
③ This drawing is of the cones and catkins from Speckled Alder shrubs at my spot. I confirmed the identification with the tree and shrub book. Now the question is what their function is and why they occur on the same branch... Bob told me that what looks like cones are actually "strobiles", more specifically. According to [www.mucphallways.org/strob/aldet.html](http://www.mucphallways.org/strob/aldet.html) and [www.ohow.com/about\\_5389105\\_river-brush-tree.html](http://www.ohow.com/about_5389105_river-brush-tree.html), the catkins are the male flowers which ~~stay~~ remain on the branches all winter and pollinate the female flowers in the spring. These produce the ~~strobiles~~ strobiles, which are like pine cones and full of seeds. Maybe the dark-colored dried ribbons are dried flower parts.



④ This is about half of a fruiting body of a grass near Sawmill Creek. It is removed from being plucked and stuffed into an egg carton, but when on the stalk, it stands pretty straight and the branches are close to the stalk. Using Grasses, An Identification Guide, by Lauren Brown, I think this grass could be Blue-joint (*Calamagrostis canadensis*), which grows in "northern bogs and swamps". Characteristic traits match my specimen include: branches to the inflorescence that hug the stem after flowering, branches in bunches, and little tufts of fuzz at the base of the flowers. Some of the seeds have this fuzz.



⑤ This is a rose hip from a wild rose shrub near Sawmill Creek. The shrub caught my eye because it had bright red-orange "berries" (hips) and still some green leaves. Due to its thorny branches leaves that look like this:  and MS's concurrence, I'm confident that it is a wild rose (*Rosa* spp.).



Go on a hike. Find small objects no bigger than an egg carton compartment.

Draw these "egg carton objects" up close and try to tell their story using sources.

You will find that through close drawing, you notice more.



# More Egg Carton Objects

② Seeds emerge when dropped by deciduous. The cone has opened. Flakes from a continuous spiral, spiral 3-4 ft 360°. X on drawing corresponds to a graphite marked scale in the real, much more organized cone.



I chose this ~~pine~~ cone for its smell - I found it on a rainy day while on Friday, Oct 28 at Tettegache State Park near the shore of Lake Superior, at one of the cartoon computers. I was sheltering under the grass from the rain and was struck by the lovely smell. The cone is from a white spruce, which I can tell by its size (Norway would be 4-6", black or red 1/4", but this one is near the 1-2" range in the tree buds) as well as by the tiny ID from the tree above. This smell brings me back to so many places, including the huge downed spruce behind the Exit dam. The smell is from the sap (pitch). I wonder why it smells!

③ A remembrance of fall. I picked this leaf up about a month ago, when some trees still had foliage. It was a brilliant red, and was now faded. I capture it in its curled state, but with brighter coloring to represent the two states of its post-senescence life. I found the leaf just behind the west dam and without the tree it came from, my best identification guide is a pin cherry leaf. Evidence includes that it is a narrow leaf with regular sharp teeth and prominent ribbed veins on the back but no leaf. It looks like other pin cherry leaves I have seen and I know they exist behind the West Dam. The Peterson guide says this tree is especially common following burns or clearings, but as building a dam... it is also one of the most common trees at the clearest site I studied this summer in north central Massachusetts.

④ A delicate yellow fungi. The first of the six objects I decided to draw, this small piece of wood with its vibrant yellow fungi has survived a month on my desk without water. I found it along the better ponds approach trail way up near where it meets the stairs. It was growing on two sticks (and the rest of it, which I broke off) under decaying newly fallen maple leaves. A big thank you to Elise, who lent me *Fascinating Fungi of the Northwoods*, by Lisa Mollen and Larry Weber. This book was very simple to use and led me to an ~~easy~~ identification I feel good about. Lemon Drops or *Bisporora citrina* occur between July

Shape: Open up with many plates.



and October (I found this one in mid-October) on a narrow log with no bark (the this one) and in clusters of many (often). They are cup shaped with a short stem and are smooth on both sides. This last part explains why I couldn't identify any pores or gills with a hand lens or with closeup photos and subsequent zoom in my scanner. Their color is beautiful! And it was even brighter when I first found it.

⑤

A reconstructed beetle/insect. I am a bit

disappointed because I allowed this specimen to dry out so much that it broke apart. I have attempted to draw it back in a normal shape because the story behind it is interesting. Back on the day I found it I noted in this journal that I found a bug dead inside a flap of bark on a paper birch. I am glad to find evidence that bugs really do go inside bark to shelter (though it's not that profound an idea, knowing what kind of insect it is, however, could maybe shed some light on why it was there). The shell-like wings tip me off (using [www.insectidentifiiction.org](http://www.insectidentifiiction.org)) that the insect is a beetle, but given that there are 25,000 species in North America I'm not sure how close I can get with a ~~crude~~ reconstruction. All I can say is that it is a green beetle, and hopefully not the emerald ash borer. So, alas, no specific idea about why it was there or why it died.

On a slide, lecture, I have a story about environmental outreach education. This summer, while in Massachusetts working in forest ecology, a woman showed up who seemed to have an business (either sang on one of our panel discussions). She gave me a brochure about beetles that I never really got around to reading, until I got home and my mom saw it in a junk pile and said, "Oh, where'd you get that? It's about the emerald ash borer." I believe the ash borer has not yet made it to Massachusetts, but education and adults are trying to spread the word about its identification in case it does come. But I didn't even read the brochure or learn anything from it, though I looked at it enough to know it was about an invasive bug. So how can outreach be more effective? Maybe a brochure that is catnip (this one was black and white folded animal paper)? Or other methods?

⑥ Paper Birch Bark.

This is simply a piece of paper birch bark that I cut from a larger piece found along the SHI between Temperance State Park and Carlton Peaks. I credit Sarah with the idea of picking it up. Birch bark is such a North Woods shape that it deserves closer attention. It is also amazingly varied in color, and was the only piece to which I could match my pink color square during Earthworms training.

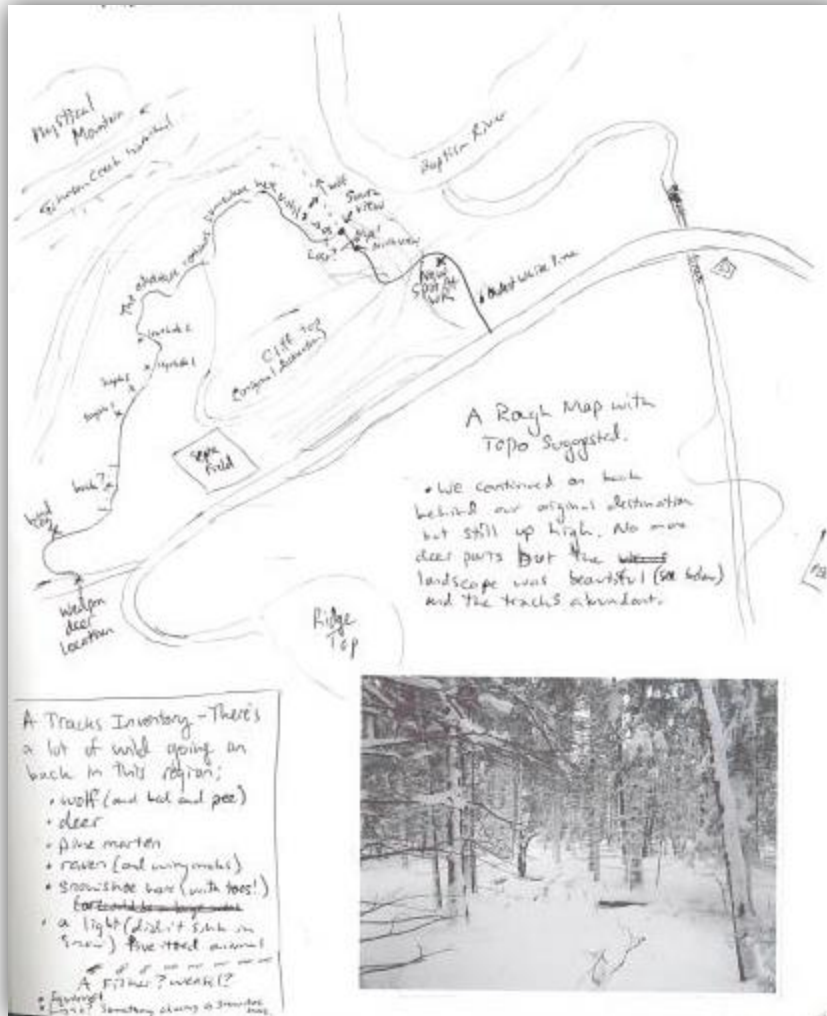


Side One



Side 2

# Guided Entry 4: Map an Outdoor Adventure

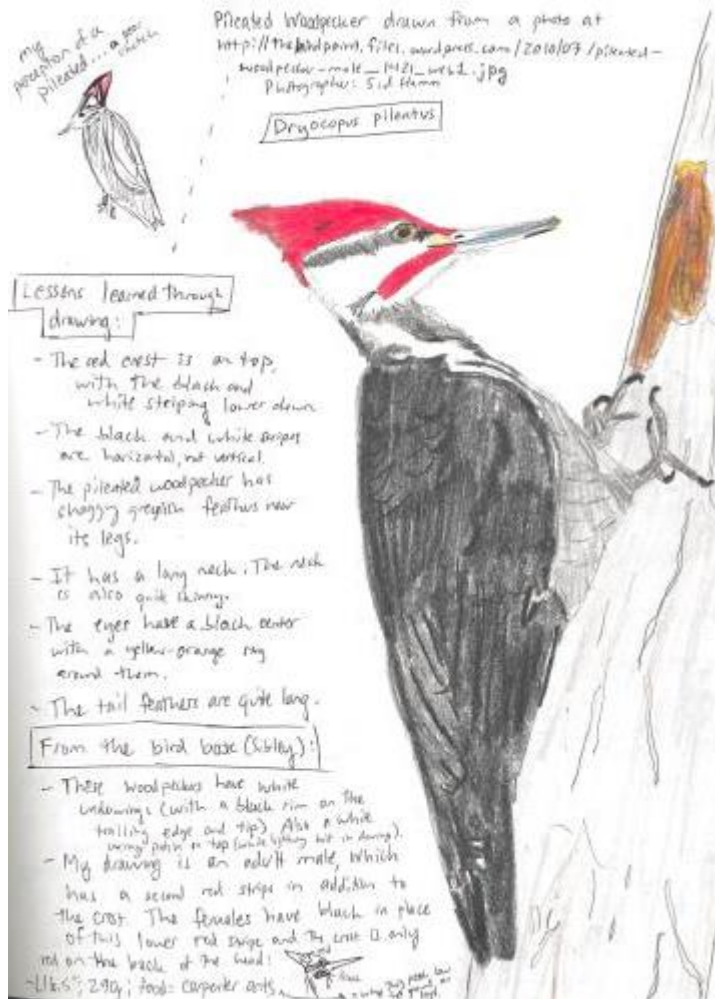


Find a friend. Go exploring. Take pictures.

When you return, map what you saw and what you found. Record questions you still have.

This adventure followed a  
deer kill, wolves, and  
ravens.

# Guided Entry 5: Do an Exploratory Drawing



Draw something interesting from memory and then from a picture.

You may learn a lot! Note the differences between the perceived bird in the upper left and the bird as drawn from a field guide picture.

# Guided Entry 6: Record Seasonal Happenings

Some natural events repeat at roughly the same time each year. Record the date every time you observe. Next year, you can look back to see if certain events occur on the same date.

at Tettegouche and ...  
in buds. They were silvery +  
← old specimen  
a [drawing of a brown bud] (Black  
line real)  
use [drawing of a green bud]  
→  
(actually they are flowers) and  
and east dawns. Apart from the



Phenology Events







5/7/14 Birding

5/11/14 Mother's Day Birds

5/18/14 Warblers!



# Guided Entry 7: Create Your Own Field Guide

Tree Type	Balsam Poplar	Black Ash	Sugar Maple
Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trees + keys hanging by tree</li> <li>• looking for black ash in Ojibwe Snowshoe</li> <li>• anticipating the smell of the sticky buds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• looking for them in Ojibwe Snowshoe</li> <li>• realizing that they are "knowing" and "shubby"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lifelong sightings</li> <li>• comparing them to new trees I don't know</li> </ul>
Identifying Features and Illustrations	<p>Bark: robust and squarish, lobes like the bark of giant poplars I've seen (at home (diff species) Cottonwoods)</p>  <p>← ridged ribs almost like handrails</p> <p>Buds: large and visible in winter compared to Black Ash + Sugar Maple</p> <p>Branching: Alternate</p> 	<p>Bark: ribbed but flattened</p>  <p>← a bit ribbing</p> <p>Branches: Shubby Opposite</p>  <p>often has bundles of upward-pointing branches</p> <p>Habitat: wet</p>	<p>Bark: dark grey, smoothish but has rough "speckles"; often covered with lichens or moss</p>  <p>← often has a splitting-off trunk</p> <p>Branches: opposite; twig delicate looking</p> 

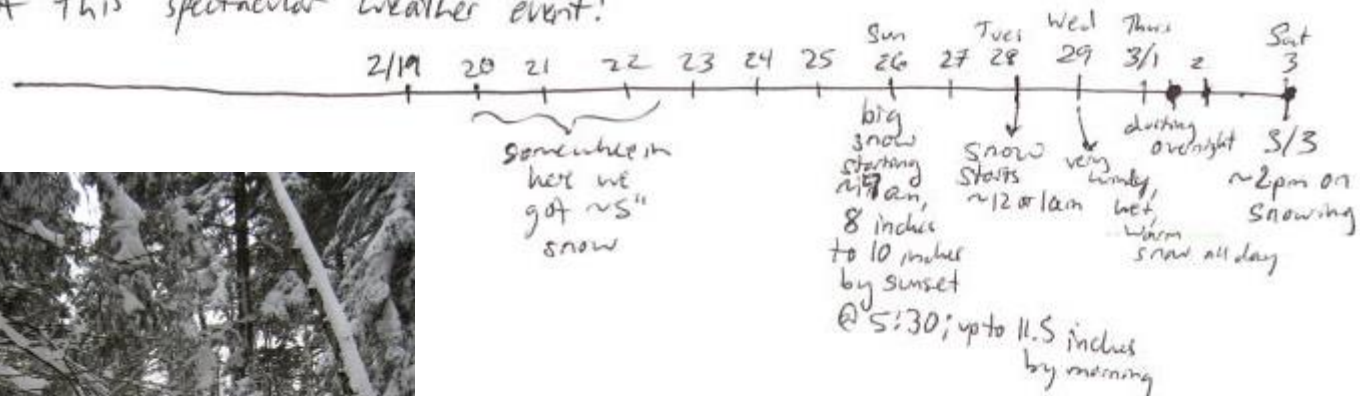
Synthesize your observations to discover how you interpret the natural world.



# Guided Entry 8: Record Weather Trends

3/3/12 Snow!

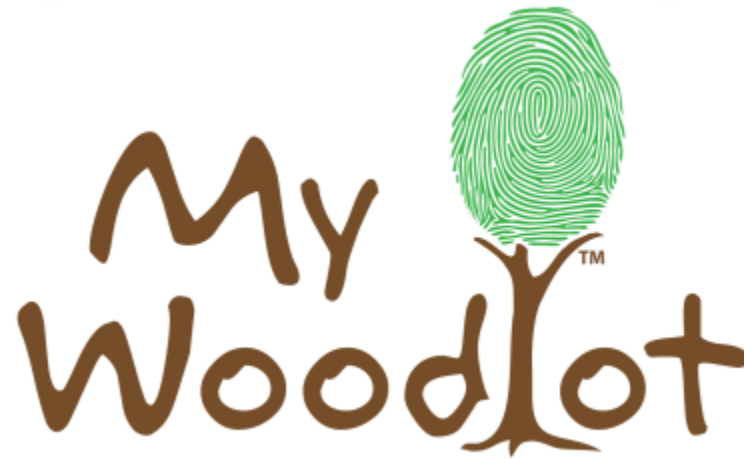
Our winter snowfall average has finally appeared. A brief timeline of this spectacular weather event!



Take note of weather events on a timeline. Try recording snowfalls, big rain events, storms, and ice in/out dates. It's especially rewarding if you repeat this every year!

Come up with Your Own Assignment

Happy Journaling!



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