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!

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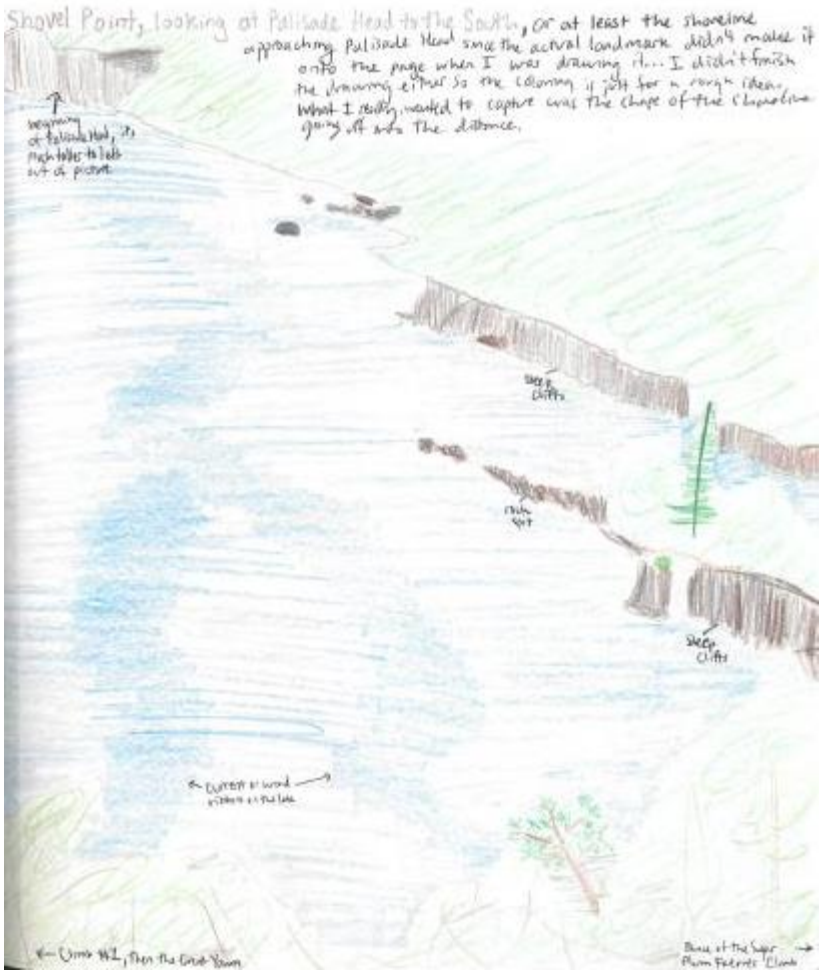
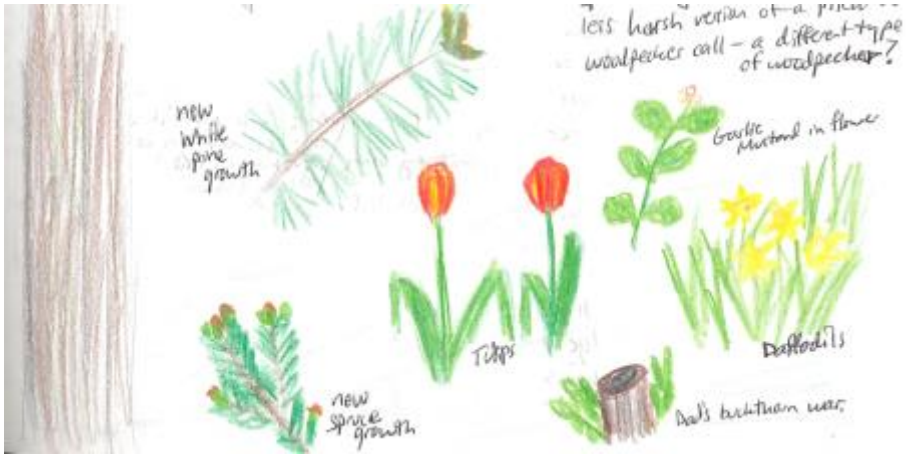
Journaling Tip 1: Write About the Present Moment

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?

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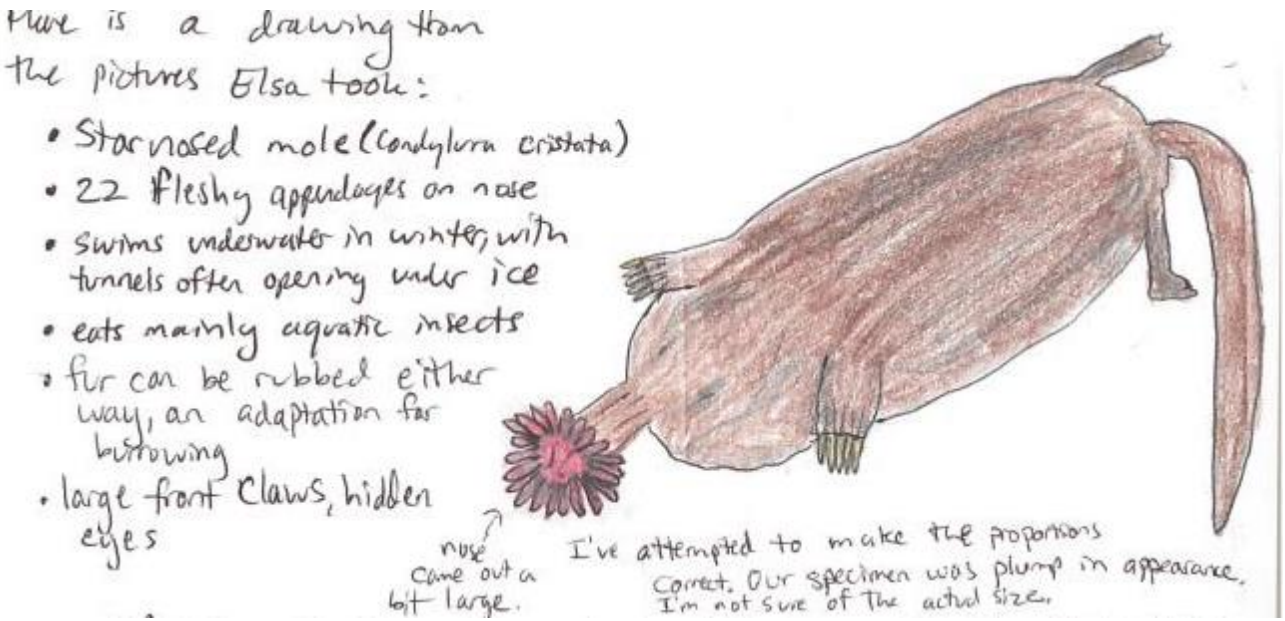
Journaling Tip 3: Drawings Need Not Be Perfect



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

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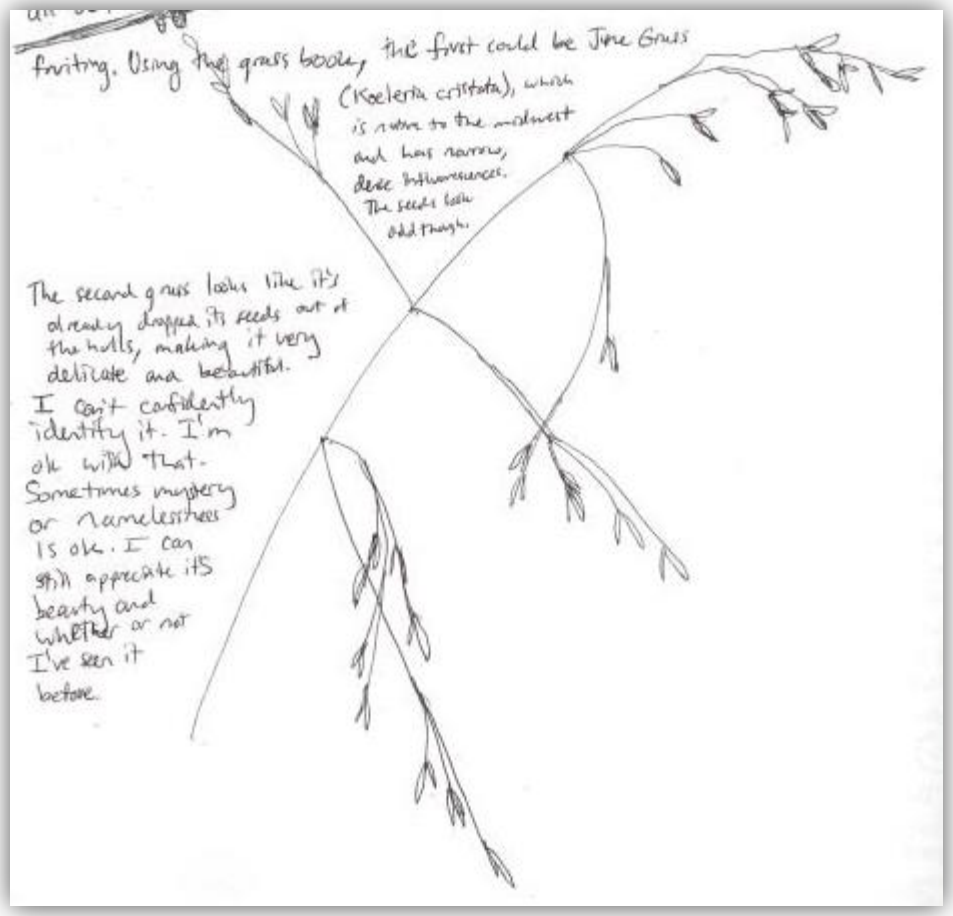
Journaling Tip 4: Combine Writing and Drawing



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.

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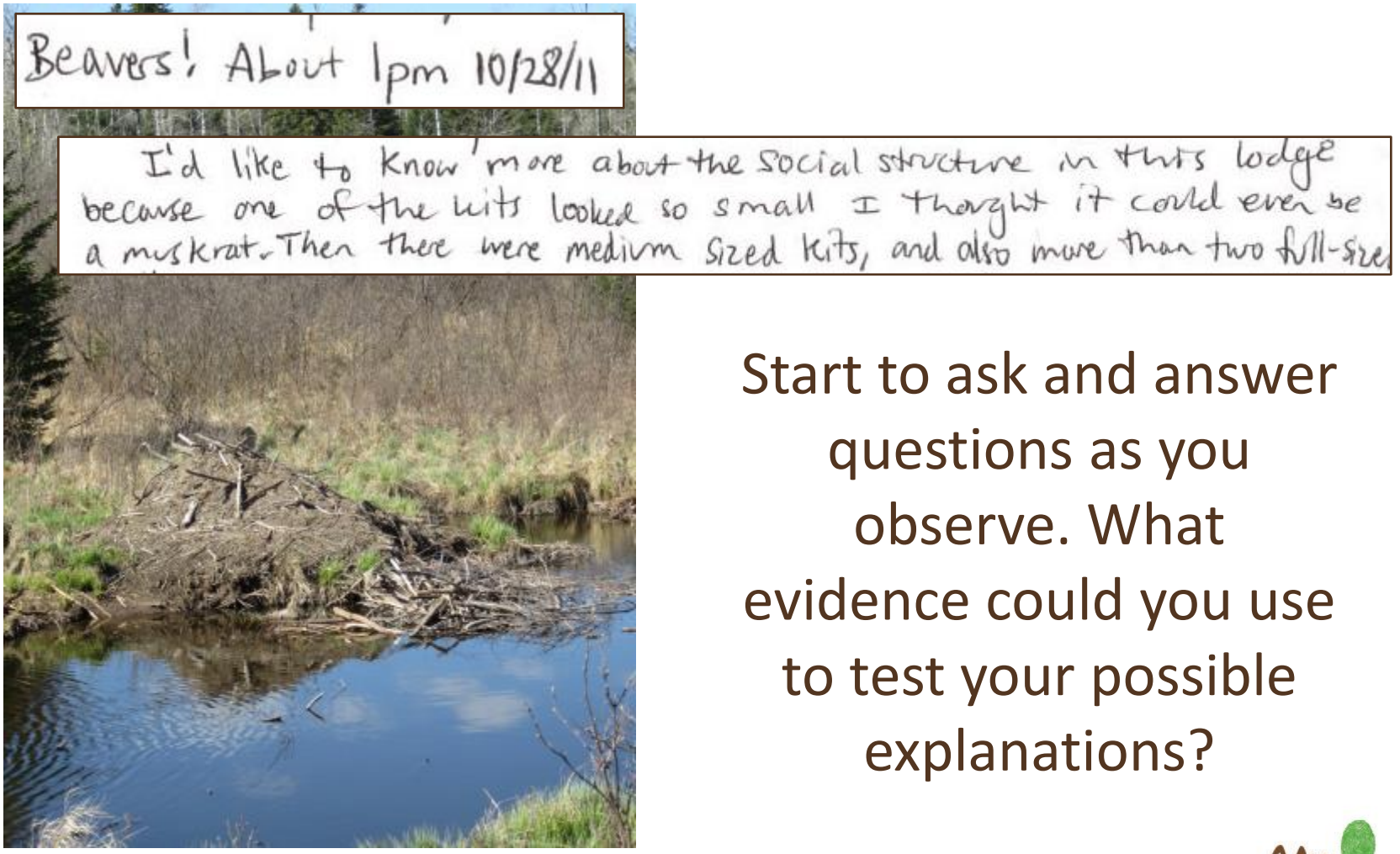
Journaling Tip 5: Use Your Senses

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



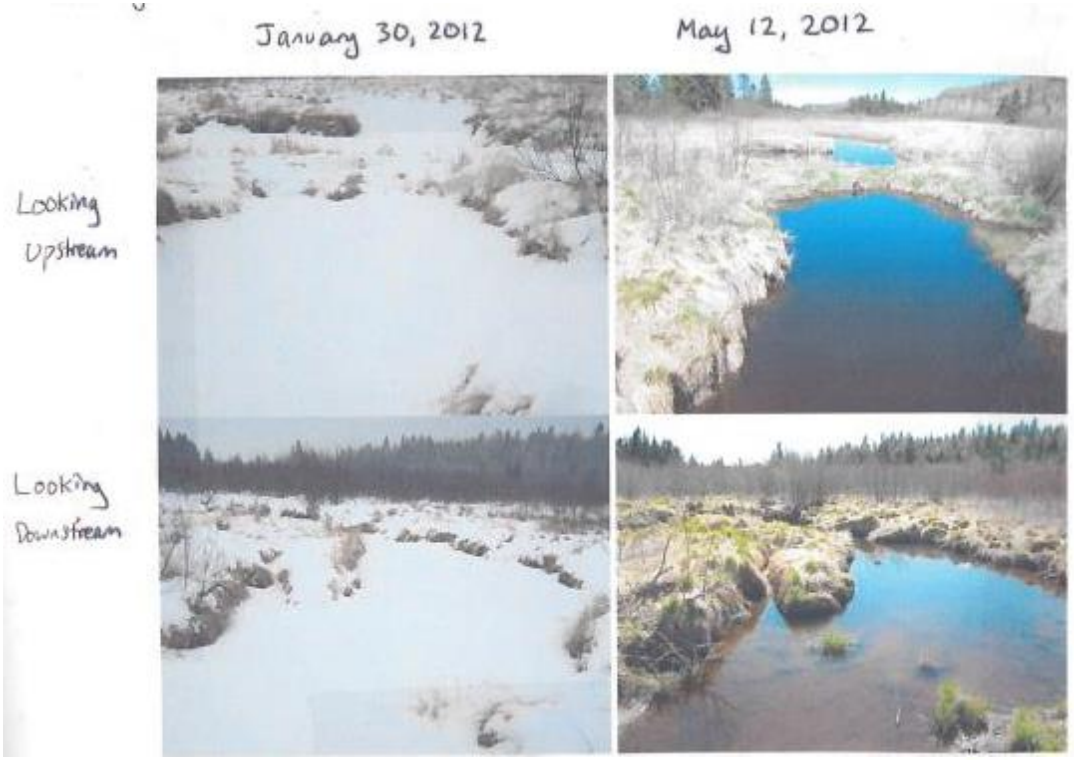
Start to ask and answer questions as you observe. What evidence could you use to test your possible explanations?

Guided Journal Entry Ideas

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

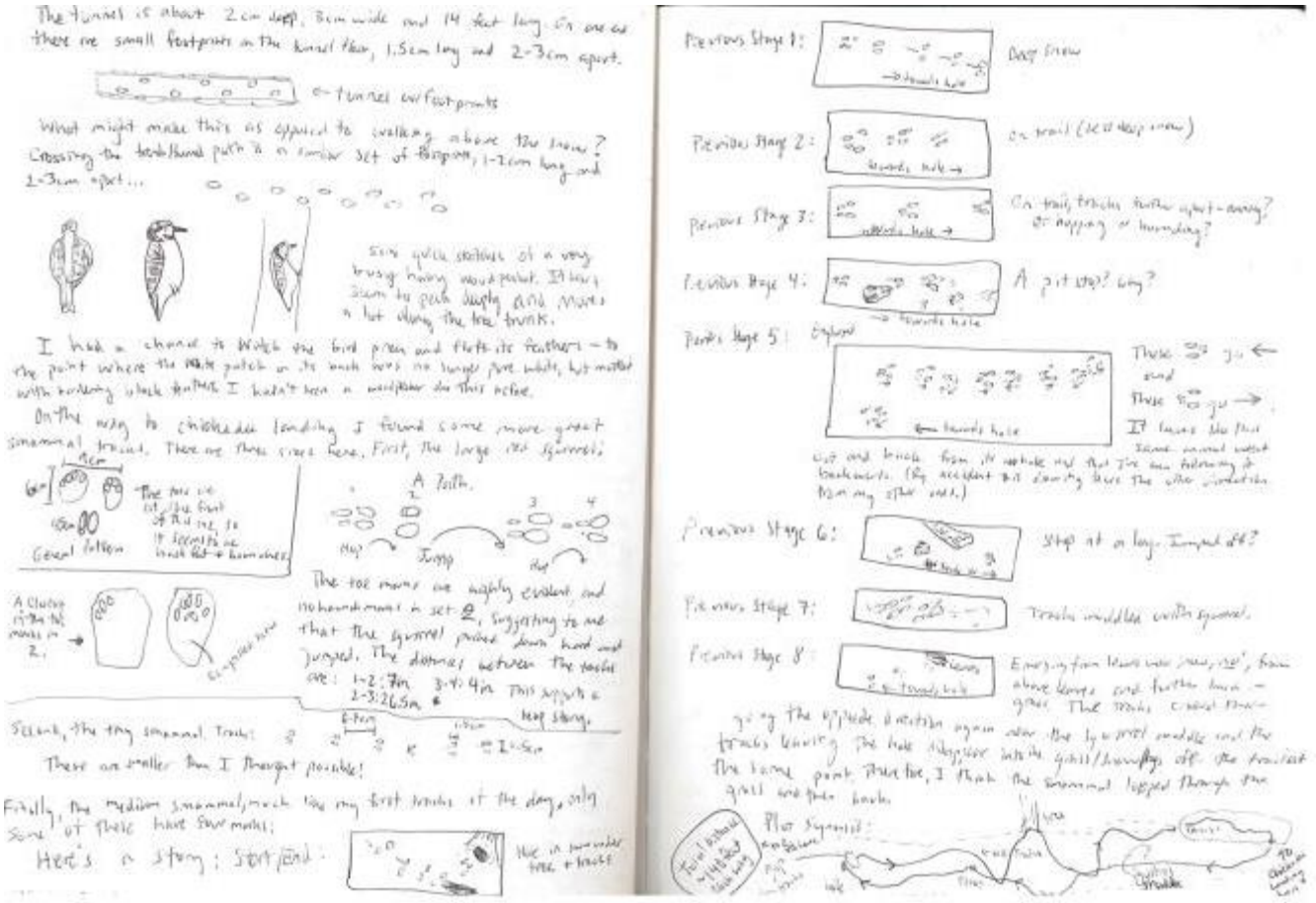
Guided Entry 1: Observe a Spot Repeatedly

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

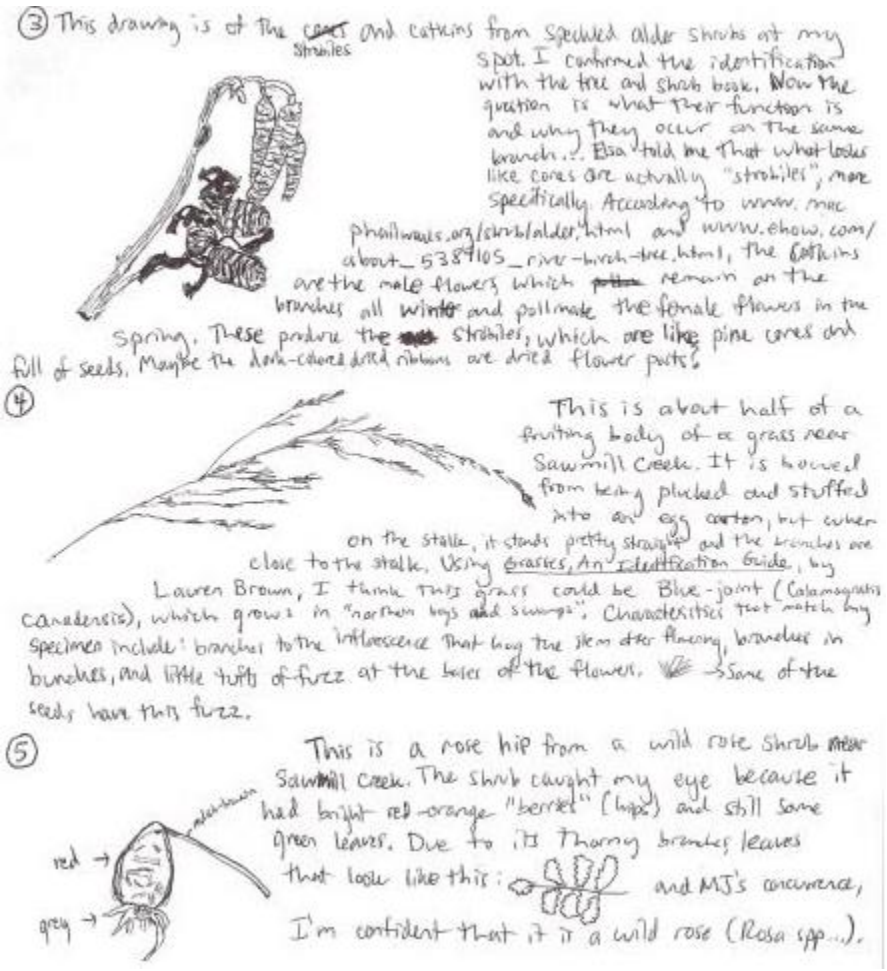


Guided Entry 2: Make Detailed Measurements

Measure and follow tracks in the snow. What's the story?



Guided Entry 3: Analyze Egg Carton Objects



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.

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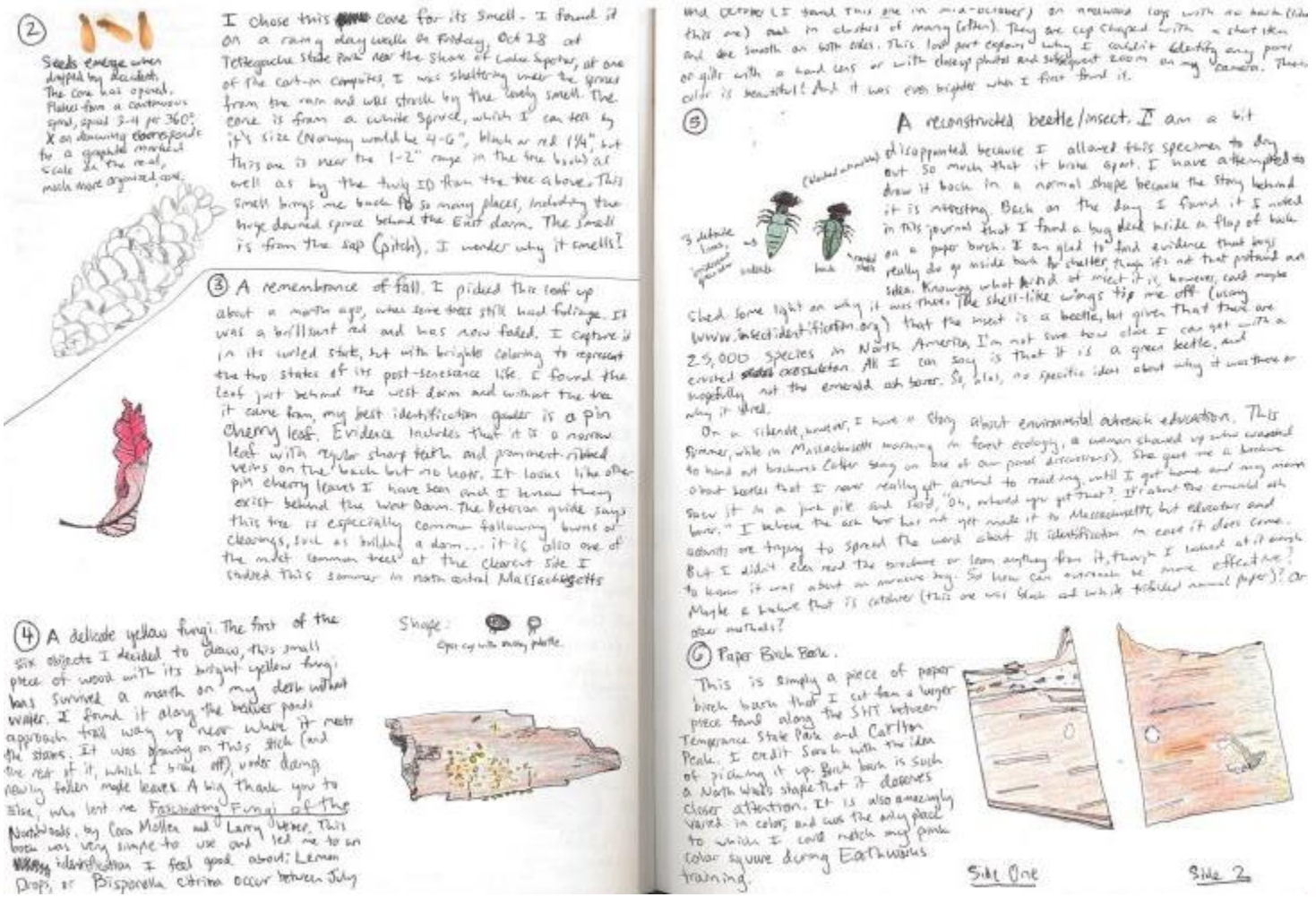
More Egg Carton Objects



(2) Seeds emerge when dropped by squirrels. The cone has opened. Flakes form a continuous spiral, about 3-4 per 360°. X on drawing corresponds to a grapefruit marked in scale to the real, much more organized cone.

I chose this cone for its smell. I found it on a rainy day walk on Friday, Oct 28 at Tettegouche State Park near the shore of Lake Superior, at one of the cart-in campsites. I was sheltering under the spruces from the rain and was struck by the lovely smell. The cone is from a white spruce, which I can tell by it's size (Norway would be 4-6", black or red 1¼", but this one is near the 1-2" range in the tree book) as well as by the twig ID from the tree above. This smell brings me back to so many places, including the huge downed spruce behind the East dorm. 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 has now faded. I capture it in its curled state, but with bright coloring to represent the two states of its post-senescence life. I found the leaf just behind the west dorm 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 hair. It looks like other pin cherry leaves I have seen and I know they exist behind the west dorm. The Peterson guide says this tree is especially common following burns or clearings, such as building a dam... it is also one of the most common trees at the clearcut side 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 bright yellow fungi has survived a month on my desk without water. I found it along the beaver ponds approach trail way up near where it meets the stairs. It was growing on this stick (and the rest of it, which I broke off), under damp rotting fallen maple leaves. A big thank you to Elise, who lent me Fascinating Fungi of the Northwoods, by Cora Mollen and Larry Weber. This book was very simple to use and led me to an identification I feel good about: Lemon Drops, or Bisporella citrina occur between July

Shape:

Spore cap with many petals

and October (I found this one in mid-October) on rotting logs with no bark (like this one) and in clusters of many (often). They are cup shaped with a short stem and are smooth on both sides. This book even explains why I couldn't identify any pixie or gilt with a hand lens or with close-up photos and subsequent zoom on my camera. 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 my journal that I found a bug died inside a flap of bark on a paper birch. I am glad to find evidence that bugs really do go inside bark for 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.insectidentification.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 crushed exoskeleton. All I can say is that it is a green beetle, and hopefully not the emerald ash borer. So, alas, no specific ideas about why it was there or why it died.

On a tidbit, however, I have a story about environmental outreach education. This summer, while in Massachusetts working in forest ecology, a woman showed up at our weekend to hand out brochures (after being on one of our pond excursions). 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, would you get that?" It's about the emerald ash borer." I believe the ash bor has not yet made it to Massachusetts, but educators and scientists 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 learned at a high to know it was about an invasive bug. So how can outreach be more effective? Maybe a behave that is catchier (this one was black and white printed on normal 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 SHT between Temperance State Park and Carlton Peak. I credit Sarah with the idea of picking it up. Birch bark is such a North Woods staple that it deserves closer attention. It is also amazingly varied in color, and was the only piece to which I could match any pink color square during Earthwise training.

Side One Side 2

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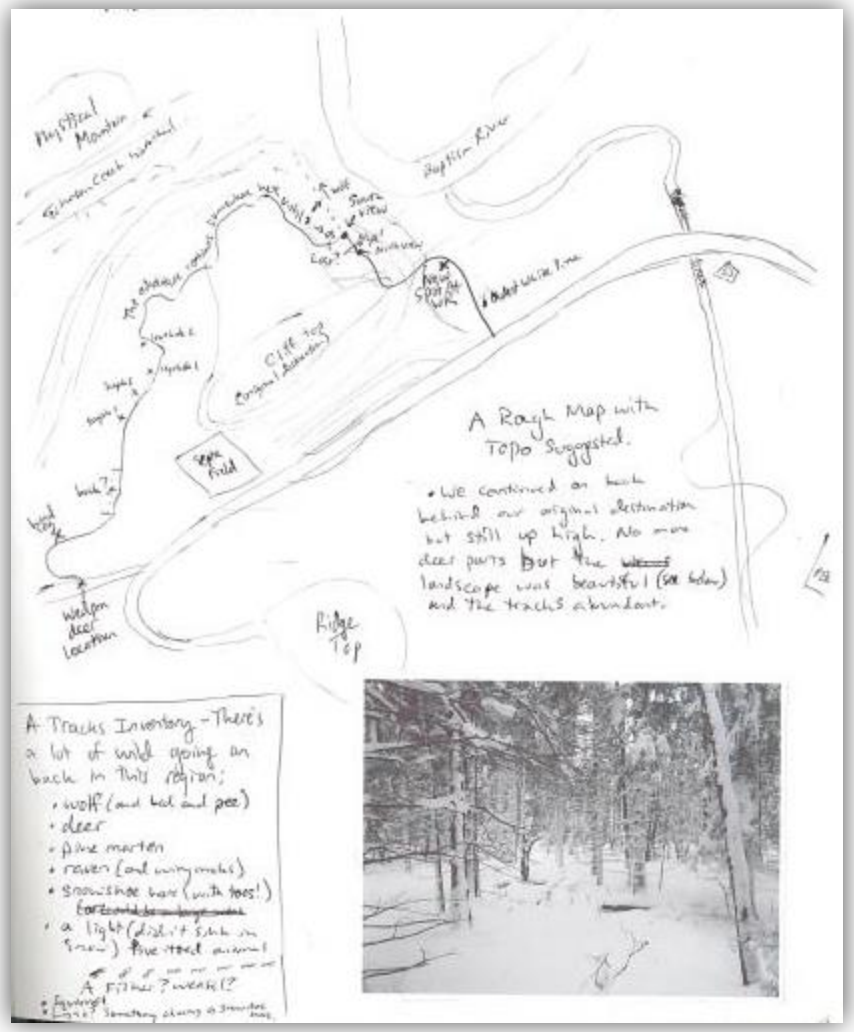
Guided Entry 4: Map an Outdoor Adventure



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.

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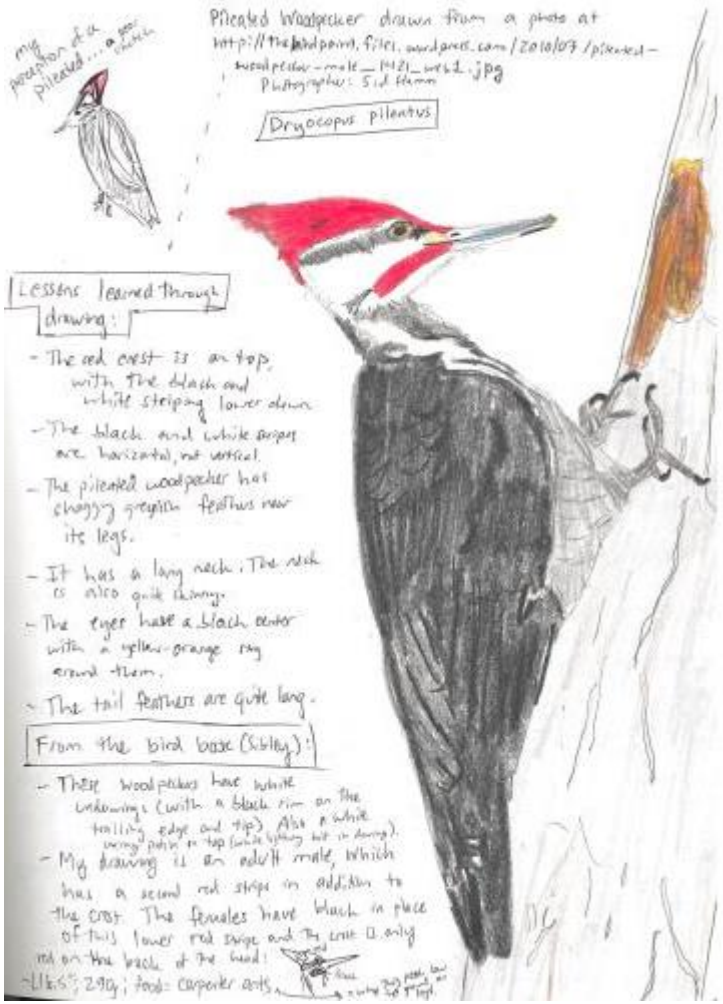
Guided Entry 5: Do an Exploratory Drawing

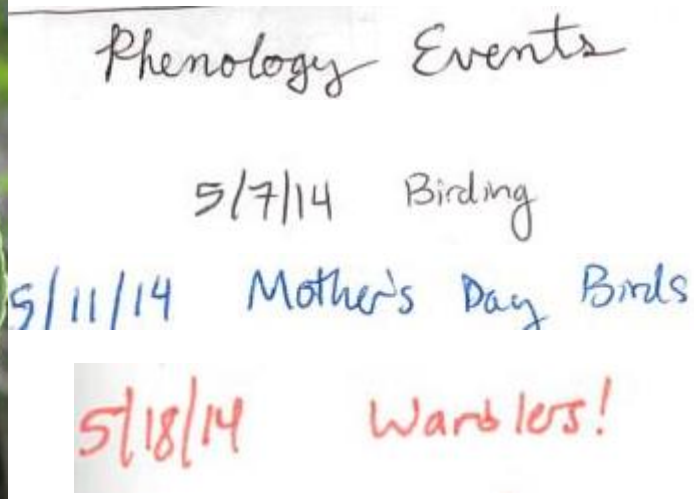


Draw something interesting from memory and then from a picture.

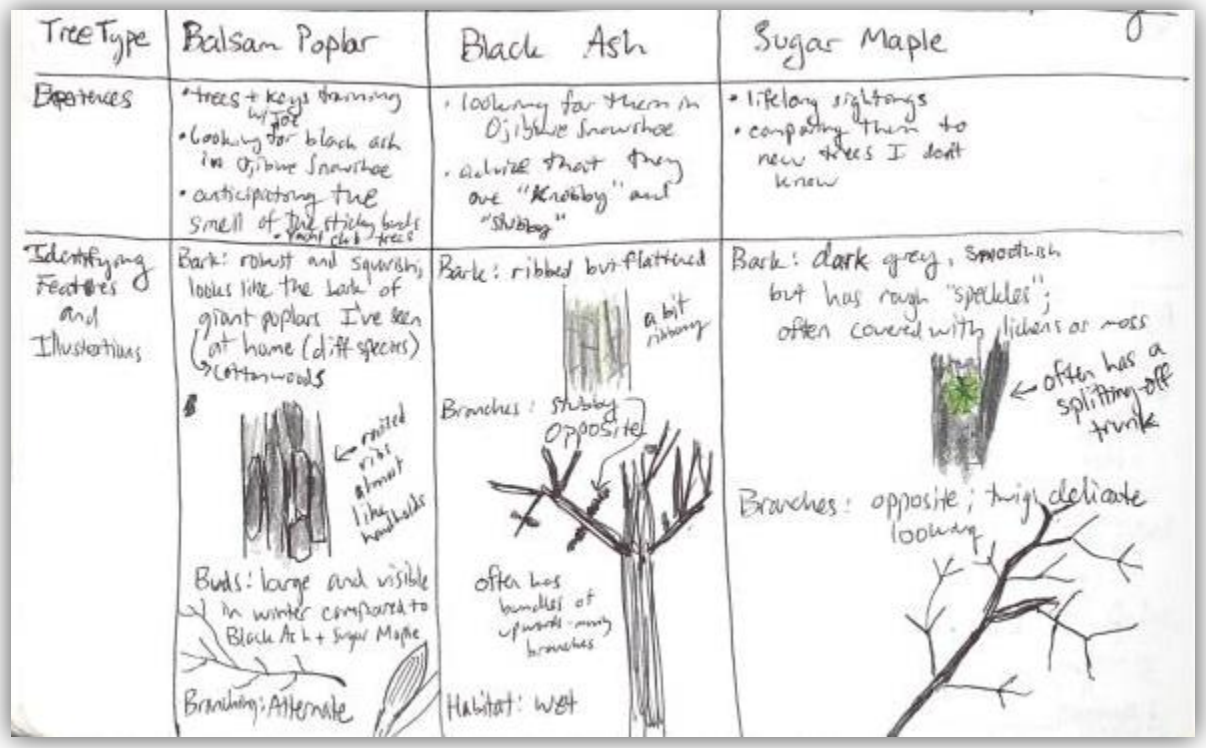
You may learn a lot! Note the differences between the perceived bird in the upper left and the bird as drawn from a field guide picture.

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.



Guided Entry 7: Create Your Own Field Guide



Tree Type	Balsam Poplar	Black Ash	Sugar Maple
Experiences	• trees + keys drawing w/ Joe • looking for black ash in Ojibwe Snowshoe • anticipating the smell of the sticky buds - Yacht club trees	• looking for them in Ojibwe Snowshoe • advice that they are "knobby" and "stubby"	• lifelong sightings • comparing them to new trees I don't know
Identifying Features and Illustrations	Bark: robust and squarish, looks like the bark of giant poplars I've seen at home (diff species) → cottonwoods rotted out almost like woodchips Buds: large and visible in winter compared to Black Ash + Sugar Maple Branching: Alternate	Bark: ribbed but flattened a bit ribbony Branches: stubby opposite often has bundles of upwards-growing branches Habitat: wet	Bark: dark grey, smoothish but has rough "speckles"; often covered with lichens or moss often has a splitting-off trunk Branches: opposite; twigs delicate looking

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

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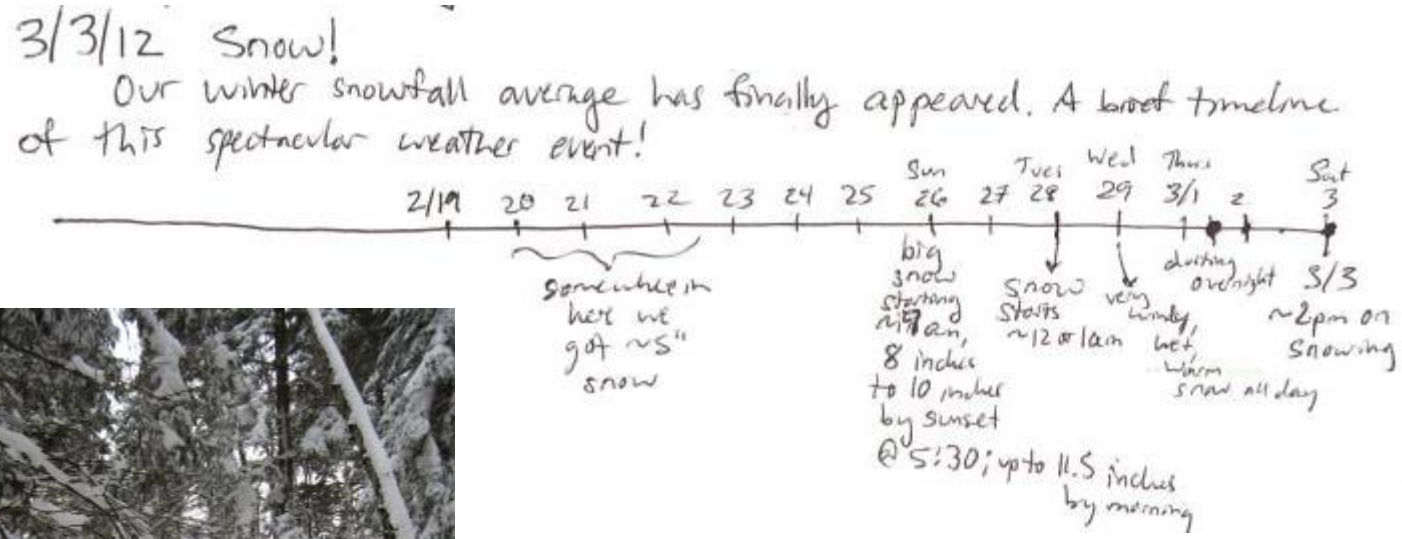
Guided Entry 8: Record Weather Trends



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!

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Come up with Your Own Assignment

Happy Journaling!

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