Memory Catchers

Nature journals bring treasured outdoor memories to life

BY GLADYS J. RICHTER | ARTWORK BY MARK RAITHEL
Mementos of my outdoor excursions can be found strewn among bookshelves, on my writing desk, and atop windowsills. The collection includes a rock with a tiny shell fragment, a framed cottonwood leaf from a favorite fishing hole, and a piece of driftwood found while hiking along the Gasconade River. Each one recalls memories of a camping trip, a hike, or a day of childhood exploration. While these artifacts help me to remember, they cannot tell the whole story. For that, I turn to my nature journals, or “memory catchers,” as I like to call them. Inside their pages are the dates, places, and people surrounding the good times spent out-of-doors.

Journaling for All Ages and Activities
It all started during the fourth grade with a class assignment to study trees. We were to collect 15 leaves, press them until dry, and glue them onto pages inside a binder. Our teacher instructed us to write each tree’s name, date of collection, and location. After that, I was hooked and began keeping nature journals on my own. Today, my journals contain sketches, watercolor washes, and notes about my experiences.

Nature journaling can take on many forms, from a simple list tracking bird species at the window feeder to a sophisticated collection of wildflower and butterfly paintings complete with their scientific names. Outdoor photos complete with notes are a common form.

Nature journaling is for all ages. Young children love to draw and show their discoveries to everyone. Bird enthusiasts adore toting weathered bird observation logs containing their life lists. Vacation and camping journals that contain treasured memories are always in style.

Getting Started
Keeping a nature journal is not expensive. All you need to start is a pencil and a notebook. If you plan to make sketches, paintings, or add photos, then an unlined journal works best. If you like to write more and draw less, you may opt for a lined journal. Spiral notebooks allow you to lay them flat to record your findings, which make them perfect for outdoor settings. As you discover your personal style, you may wish to add ink, chalk, charcoal, colored pencils, or paints. The possibilities are endless.

A nature journal is a great place to keep brochures and maps. It is easy to tuck a small, thin,
notebook and a pencil into a jacket pocket or backpack for the journey. I like to carry a nontoxic glue stick along to attach small paper souvenirs. When I visit nature centers, I inquire about site-specific pamphlets, stamps, or postcards for my nature journal. Children enjoy pasting cutout pictures of wildlife into their books as well.

Types of Nature Journals
Journals can be of a single topic of study or a set of observations (number of wild turkeys spotted on grandpa’s farm). It can also consist of a running list of weekly, monthly, and yearly nature sightings (return of spring songbirds, newly hatched lizards racing in the garden, or the first frost of autumn).

Among my treasured possessions is a journal about bird nests that my father and I started. We made notes about bird nests we spotted around our home and on nature walks in Missouri. It is a very narrow, but engaging, approach to nature study.

Many of my notebooks have chronological entries that include the first flowers of spring, summer fishing trips, and the fall migration of monarchs. Winter entries have notes on temperature, snowfall measurements, and visitors to the bird feeders.

Some avid hunters and anglers also keep journals for later reference. Careful observation notes about the activity of deer (rubs and scrapes) and turkey (roosting locations, direction of gobbling, and size of flocks) can all aid in your hunting trips. Weather patterns, cover, and water levels can give clues as to when and where the fish are likely biting.
Tips for Keeping a Journal
Nature journaling should be a fun experience. When traveling and hiking, it is best to carry just a few lightweight tools. Your journal, some colored pencils, and a pencil sharpener are all you need.

Two other tools that delight both scientists and children are a magnifying glass and a small ruler. With these you can record details in your journal to help you identify insects, rocks, plants, animal tracks, and more. Because I like to travel light while journaling about Missouri’s native plants, I carry a piece of string with quarter-inch increments marked off in permanent ink to use as my ruler. It is flexible enough to measure stems, leaves, petals, and even tree trunks. This string is easy to roll up and tuck inside the envelope pocket of my journal.

While journaling with young children, keep it simple. Consider taking a small box of crayons and removing the wrapping paper from each one. Then take your budding naturalists on a walk where they can find many types of leaves, tree bark, and rocks (flat sandstone works great). Let them use the unwrapped crayons to make rubbings on paper to discover a world of textures and patterns. Adults interested in rubbings may prefer traditional charcoal instead of wax crayons; charcoal is more fragile but yields more detailed results.

If you find a bird feather, gently lay it beneath the paper to rub also; just remember to leave the feather in nature when you are finished. In fact, it is usually a good practice to record your discoveries and leave the natural items where you find them.

Encourage your children to use vivid descriptions involving all the senses, shapes, and colors. Refer to objects that they know well such as fire engine red or banana yellow.

Journals of Yesterday and Today
Journals were companions to early travelers. Among the most famous of these are the journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Second Lieutenant William Clark. Looking at their travel journals, one can catch a glimpse of how plant and animal life was distributed in America centuries ago. Their journals paint a glorious picture of the wildflowers, medicinal plants, flocks of birds, hunting excursions, and lands before them.

Notes and drawings kept by naturalist and painter John James Audubon and explorer Henry Rowe Schoolcraft capture the animal life and landscape of Missouri. Some nature journals mention species now extinct, such as the Carolina parakeet and the passenger pigeon. Other journal entries depict seemingly endless prairies with tall grasses and hardly a tree in sight for miles.

Our present-day landscape is, in many ways, vastly different from what early settlers first came upon. Keeping a journal today can help give your grandchildren a window view of the natural world around you and your generation.
Look for similarities in nature to familiar sights or sounds. One of my favorite observations occurred while watching fox sparrows. These tiny birds acted much like chickens on the farm — scratching, bouncing to and fro, and stirring up leaves.

Older children may enjoy different types of nature journaling tools. A small backpack with some watercolor pencils, a brush, and a tiny container of water is a fun way to add splashes of color to their entries. They can use small squares of watercolor paper that they can later glue into their journals. On a warm, sunlit day, watercolor art dries very fast.

For everyone, nature journaling is a great way to become a better observer of nature. Take time to really notice your surroundings before writing or drawing in your journal. Listen for sounds, and take note of colors and smells. Watch for quick animal movements. Simple line gestures showing the actions of animals can help in identification. For example, wrens are very feisty little birds that never sit still for very long. Noting their size, sound, behavior, and color markings give them away.

Take notice of the small pieces of nature’s puzzle. Snails, buds on trees, and the activities of a busy ant colony can all become subjects for quiet moments spent with your journal.

Go to where the action is so that you are excited about journaling your observations. Get inspired by hummingbird feeders in your yard, a tour at a trout hatchery to see the fish, or a garden filled with native wildflowers and visiting butterflies.

Conservation nature centers are great places to journal. Contact your local center to find out when their next scheduled family hike or nature program takes place. They may even have an upcoming program on nature observation and journaling. You can also take a look at upcoming programs for your region at mdc.mo.gov/node/252.

Your nature journal is a great place to express your personal style and outdoor preferences. With your journal by your side, you and your family can enjoy a wide variety of adventures to record, from hiking, camping, and kayaking to bird watching, fishing, and hunting.

The next time you plan on going on an outdoor excursion, why not tuck a notepad and pencil in your backpack or pocket and capture a few memories.

Gladys J. Richter is an interpretive writer from Richland, Missouri. She and her family enjoy many outdoor activities including fishing, kayaking, and seasonal nature walks.