Journaling:

Keeping Track of Special Things

Have you every kept a diary? Did you write down where you went, with whom you talked, what you thought about? Later, you can look back and remember all the things that happened over the course of a year, and how you have changed. When you look back, what you discover can be surprising.

The same is true with a nature journal. Writing a nature journal is a great chance to learn about yourself and the world you live in. A nature journal can be serious or silly. It can focus on a specific part of nature, like flowers or birds or bees, or a place, like your schoolyard or neighborhood. You can even use your nature journal to keep track of the special natural places you visit with your family.

You can write about the beautiful things you see and how they make you feel. What do you think about when you see the seasons change? How do you feel when you see a flower crushed on the pavement? You can make lists of the different kinds of plants and animals you see. Maybe you can add drawings or sketches of what you have seen.

You can do whatever you want with your nature journal. The only things you need are you and nature—and pen and paper!

by Mel Goldsipe

What? You think there’s no nature where you live?

Look again!

Watch a street tree on your block. LOOK UP at the clouds. Listen for the sound of the wind. Visit a park with your family. Find your nearest community garden. Every corner of New York City has nature waiting to be discovered and explored.

Journal pages by Gabriel Willow
I live on the second floor of an apartment building in Queens. My kitchen window looks out on the street. I decided to write about the new street tree in front of my kitchen window. I took photographs too.

4/9/08—The new tree is a honeylocust. It is about 12 feet tall and the trunk is three inches across. The leaves haven’t come out yet.

4/18/08—Green buds beginning to emerge.

4/24/08—It’s been over 70 degrees for three days; much warmer than usual. Honeylocust had green “sprouts” showing at tips of buds at 2pm and by 6pm they were fully opened.

5/5/08 Weather was cloudy with some drizzle or rain and 50 degrees for three days. Then it cleared up yesterday by noon. Honeylocust leaves open enough that leaflets are distinct. Each leaf, made up of tiny leaflets is about two to three inches long. Another, much older, honeylocust down the block has far fewer open leaves, but many more buds along branches.

5/31/08 Honeylocust has leaves only up to 4 inches long, whereas older ones on block have leaves as long as six inches. Flowers are starting to open. The petals are yellow and 1/16 inch long.

6/6/08 It’s been mostly cloudy all week. It is getting warmer every day. The temperature is above normal. The older honeylocusts on the block have larger leaves and leaflets and longer flower clusters than the new one. When flower clusters turn brown, they fall off. There are tons of them on the street when it gets windy. The new honeylocust in front of the house has many fewer flowers.

6/12/08 Honeylocust has lots of yellow leaflets since yesterday. Other honeylocusts on block have all green leaves. Honeylocust still has a few flower clusters remaining. They are all brown and dry. When the flowers fall off, the leftover stalk is brown and bumpy.
7/1/08 Honeylocust lost a lot of its leaflets in the rain and wind over the last few days. Lots of yellowing leaf veins are sticking up all over, but the leaflets are all over the ground. Tree is looking paler green, but the other honeylocusts on the block are normal green.

7/7/08 Leaves are all pale green to yellow. Tips of some of uppermost leaflets are turning brown. One whole branch is leafless. One or two leaf clusters have new leaves sprouting to replace ones that have fallen off. They’re ¼ inch long and look like curved feathers. Other honeylocusts on block are dark green.

7/15/08 Leaves are still pale yellow. There are clusters of leaves sprouting along the trunk, and they are yellow-green too. I looked closer later and saw some new leaves growing in. Most are three inch long green leaves. There are also new, one to two inch long just opened leaves. The newest leaves are reddish-green. There are also many leftover bare leaf veins.

7/19/08 The honeylocust has put out many new leaves. Some are fully grown out by now and are about six inches long. Some are only two inches long. They are in clusters as before, but the fully grown ones aren’t as green as the ones on the older honeylocusts on the block. There aren’t as many resprouted leaves as there were originally. Some branches are still bare, except for the leftover leaf stalks remaining after the dead leaflets fell off.

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During the summer, I like to take walks around ponds or lakes and look for Odonates. “Odonata” (pronounced “o do NAY ta”) is the word that scientists use for dragonflies and damselflies. I record in my nature journal exactly what I see these bugs doing.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

Size is one of the main differences between dragonflies and damselflies. Dragonflies are larger than damselflies. You can remember this by thinking that the dragons in fairytales are bigger than the damsels – young ladies - they kidnap.

Another difference is that dragonflies land with their wings spread wide open. You can see all four wings at one time when they land. Damselflies are more “ladylike.” They close their wings when they land, just like a proper lady closes her legs when she sits. Therefore, you can see only two wings when a damselfly lands. Again, think of the spread wings of a dragon and the closed legs of a damsel!

These critters feed on flies, mosquitoes, and sometimes each other! If you see a dragonfly or damselfly trying to catch dinner, write an “E” underneath your drawing for “eating.”

Odonates sometimes chase each other around. Territorial behavior is when a male chases or fights another male. Territorial behavior happens when two animals are trying to figure out where they want to live. They might fight over a hollow tree or a section of meadow. They don’t want to share their home with anyone else. Odonates are not the only insects that show territorial behavior. Almost all animals use territorial behavior to decide where they want to live. If you see two Odonates fighting, write an “F” underneath your drawing of a dragonfly or damselfly for “fighting.”

When odonates mate, they sit on top of each other and fly around in a circle. Then the female flies low over the water. She taps the surface with her behind to lay her eggs. These eggs will hatch and live underneath the water for a few months. Ovipositing is the scientific word for egg-laying. “Ovi-” means “eggs.” “Posit” means “to lay.” If you see a female laying eggs, write “O” underneath your picture for “ovipositing.”

At the end of your odonate observation, count up how many dragonflies and damselflies you found. Think about what they were doing when you first saw them: did you write an E, F, or O? How many were fighting? Were any laying eggs? Were there more dragonflies or damselflies, or were they equal in number? How many were eating? Did you find more Odonates at 12:00 PM or 5:00 PM? By answering these questions, you are learning important information about how your environment works.

Try keeping a journal over a few days. Then your journal will be as accurate as possible. Compare your journal with a friend’s journal. What differences or similarities did you find?

Here is an example of my journal:

Dragonflies: Total 3, 2 Fighting, 1 Laying Eggs.
Damselflies: Total 1, 1 Eating