



Drawn to Nature

Sketching can enrich your outdoor experiences, even if you're not artistically inclined.

By Bethann Garramon Merkle

There are many reasons to sketch what you see around you in Montana's outdoors, even if you don't consider yourself an "artist." I'll start with my own reasons.

I grew up in Choteau, but I didn't know much about the wonders of the Rocky Mountain Front ecosystem until I left the area. I went to college in Missoula and felt disoriented by the steep valleys and often dreary skies. The size of the city (30 times that of Choteau) overwhelmed me. As often as possible, I returned east to the open vistas of the Front.

Then I got lucky. I signed up for a one-year program on conservation and land-based livelihoods.

I didn't grow up camping or hiking, but the program introduced me to backpacking and showed me how to pull together my long-standing interests in science and art. Every student was required to keep a field journal to document what we learned. Ever since I was a young girl, I'd liked to draw. The integration of art and ecology hooked me.

The practice of drawing and note-taking showed me how to feel at home west of the mountains. I especially loved a weekly assignment to sit in the same exact place and notice how things changed throughout the seasons. During that year, I spent a lot of my time sketching birds and plants, and through that process those species changed for me from novelties into familiar characters. In this way, natu-

ral history-through-art also became a powerful lens for me to explore, understand, and reconnect to the Rocky Mountain Front region where I'd grown up.

I wanted to share this tool with everyone. Along with other side jobs, I worked my way through college as an illustrator and artist-in-residence for a water science nonprofit. When I graduated, I went back to the Front to teach conservation and natural history to kids who were just like me when I was growing up. I used art to teach students the names of our local mountains, the parts of birds, and other aspects of their surrounding natural world.

As a student and then a teacher, I frequently encountered peers, parents, teachers, and children who were leery of the outdoors or art or both. Over time, I came to understand the root of their hesitancy.

Without instruction, drawing and exploring nature can feel daunting. More than anything, beginners don't know where to begin. I've spent almost 20 years working to bridge this gap. I teach people how to start sketch-

ing the natural world, and by doing so they become more knowledgeable and comfortable in the outdoors.

INEXPENSIVE HOBBY

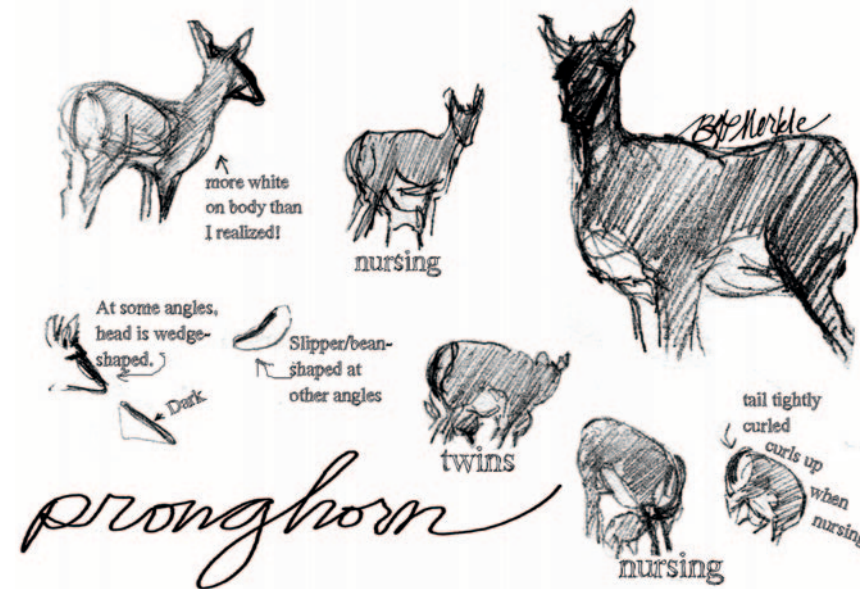
Sketching costs almost nothing in materials. It requires only something to draw on and with. While you can spend plenty on various fancy art supplies, a pen and scrap paper are all you actually need. And any natural thing you observe can be your subject matter, including a houseplant, a bird in the backyard, or an elk in a high meadow.

There are many reasons to try field sketching for yourself or to encourage others (including students) to join you. Sketching can help us document, learn, and share what we experience outdoors. It enhances our ability to focus, a rare and vital skill in a time when our attention is fragmented by texts, social media, emails, and the troubles of the modern world. In addition, reflecting on what we see through sketching and writing helps us process new and complex information.

For instance, you may see a tree as just a tree. But when you look closely and repeatedly sketch it, you begin to notice things that previously escaped your eye—bark texture, moss growing on certain areas, misshapen leaves, branch patterns, subtle variations in color, and more. Do this with multiple tree species and you'll start to recognize them easily. You may even find yourself referencing your past drawings rather than a plant ID book.

As a hunter and angler, I find that sketch-

Sketching is like practicing the piano or fly casting. It's something you work on and build upon as you improve with each attempt.



ing helps connect me to the wildlife and fish I pursue and eat. You can sketch the animals you harvest, the hunting, fishing, and camping gear you use, and your surroundings. In particular, I've found that sketching animal tracks has helped me recognize the wildlife species making them whenever I'm afield.

STEP BY STEP

All this might sound nice, but you might still find drawing intimidating. Here are the seven steps I recommend to help people feel comfortable learning to draw:

1. Keep in mind that drawing is a skill, not a talent.

The drawings you may admire are usually done by people trained to draw. For instance, the trick of making a road or river appear to recede off into the distance, known as one-point perspective, was developed by mathematicians and artists over hundreds of years. Using shading to create three dimensions is another technique that is easily taught. You can learn the basics in a few hours, and then steadily improve each time you practice.

2. Let yourself practice.

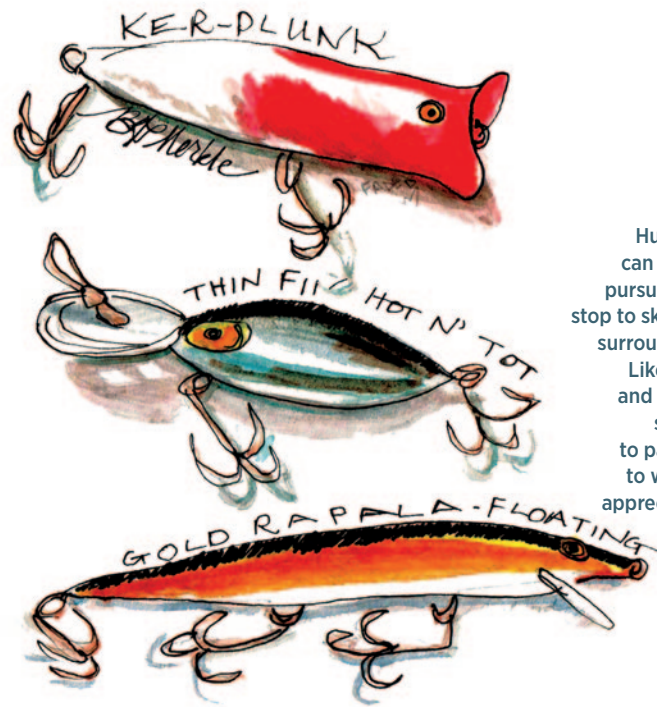
Drawing isn't magic. It's unlikely you'll be

instantly good at it. Focus on drawing as a tool for noticing and learning, rather than on the technical "rightness" of each sketch. Think of it like practicing the piano: You don't pry off the keys you misplay and toss them away. Likewise, don't erase, cross out, or throw sketches away. Instead, build on and learn from them.

3. Sketch a lot, in ink.

If you push yourself to draw the bird you're watching in ink (no erasing) at least 10

times in a minute (or before it flies away), you'll have no time to fuss over how perfect each rendering is. Also, this "gesture sketching" often captures the energy and postures of that bird in a more lively way than if you labored for an hour over a detailed drawing. Put another way, the more you sketch, the less precious each individual sketch may become. And more sketching leads to more coordination between your mind, your eye, and your hands, over time making you more skilled.



Hunters and anglers can take a break from pursuing their prey and stop to sketch their gear or surrounding vegetation. Like hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching, sketching is a way to pay close attention to where you are and appreciate it more fully.

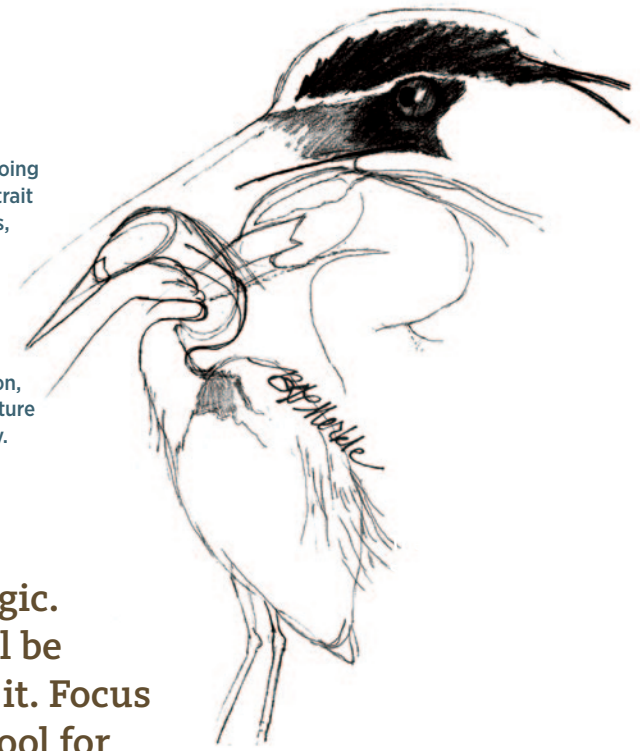
4. Shift the goalposts.

It can be hard not to care how your sketch turns out. I recommend an exercise that makes it impossible to control the outcome. If that sounds counterproductive, it is; that's the point. It frees beginners from having to "produce" something frame-worthy and allows them to just experiment with no fear of failure. This is the first exercise in every workshop I lead, and it usually does the most to put people at ease.

Here's how it works: Put a small object like a feather, bone, or leaf close to you on a table. Put your drawing paper on your lap under the table. Keep your pen on the surface of the paper at all times and try not to lift your hand or you'll lose your place.

Imagine your eye is an ant crawling along the surface of the object, and your hand is being pulled along. Draw the whole object as quickly as possible (10 to 15 seconds is plenty). Draw the object several times this way.

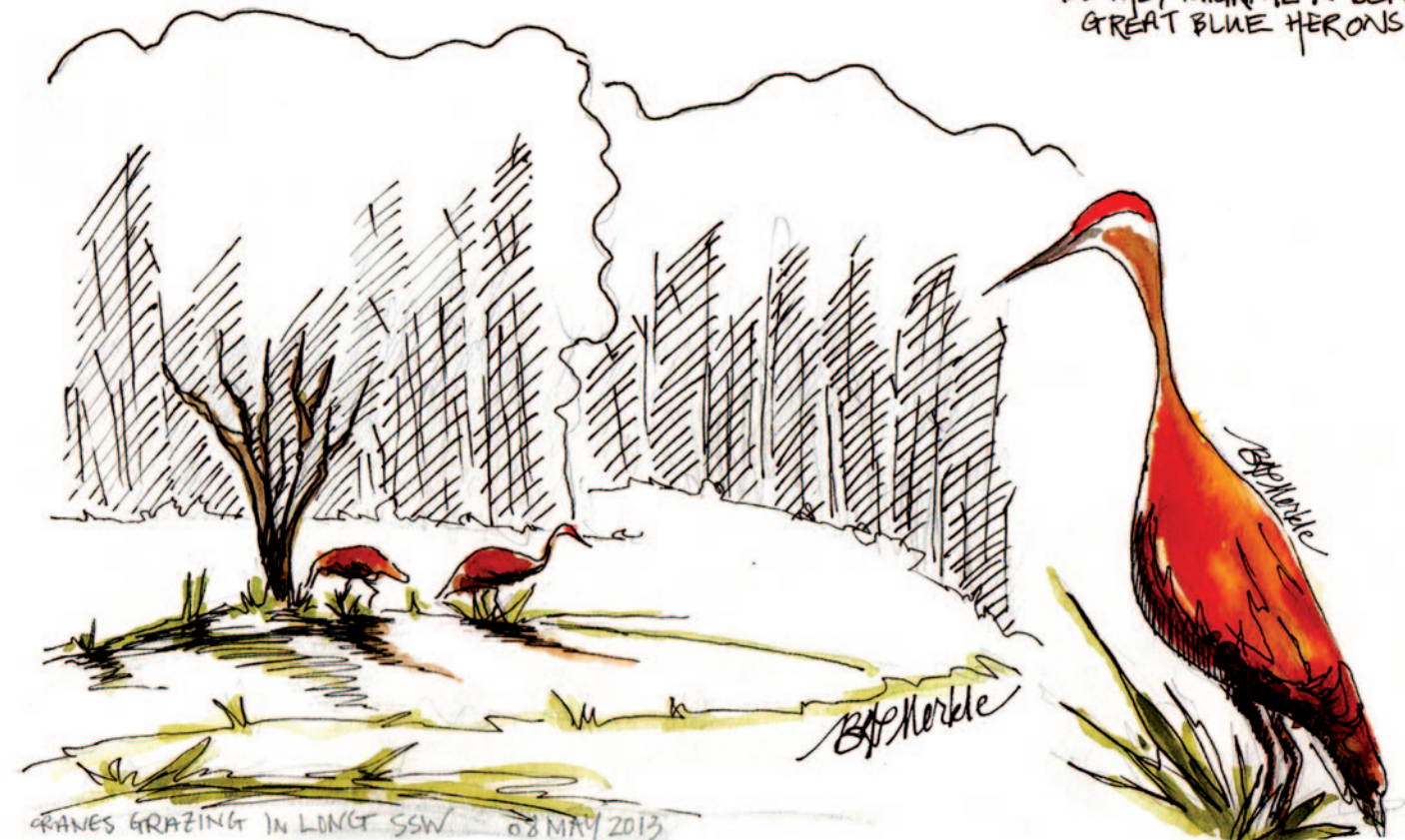
Bear in mind that what you are doing is *sketching*, not preparing a portrait for the National Gallery. Sketches, like these of a great blue heron, are supposed to look unfinished. That's okay. That's the point, in fact. You are just practicing, getting a feel for your pen, developing hand-eye coordination, and learning to see objects of nature with more intention and intensity.



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Sandhill cranes
GRUS CANADENSIS

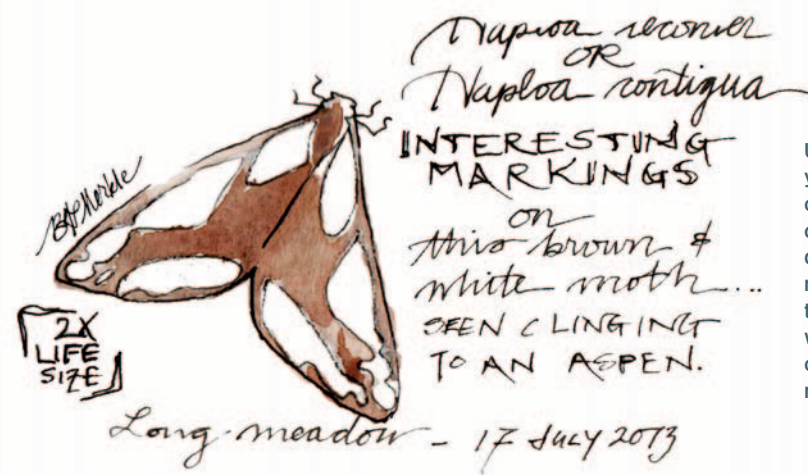
WHAT DO THEY EAT?
• WHICH (♀/♂/BOTH) INCUBATE NEST?
• DO THEY TOLERATE HERONS?
• DO THEY MIGRATE N BEFORE GREAT BLUE HERONS?



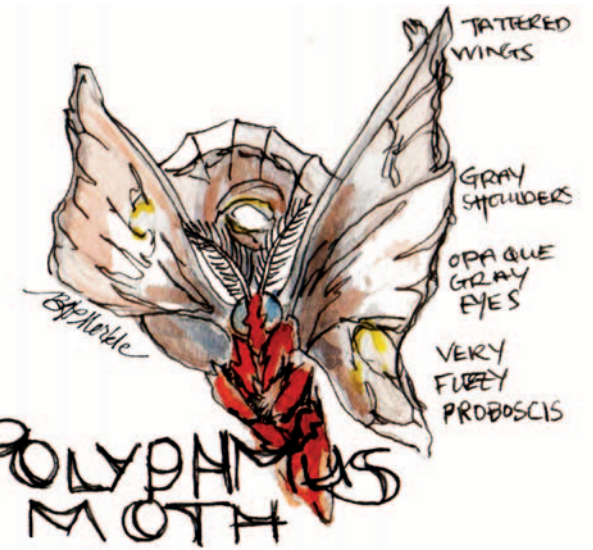
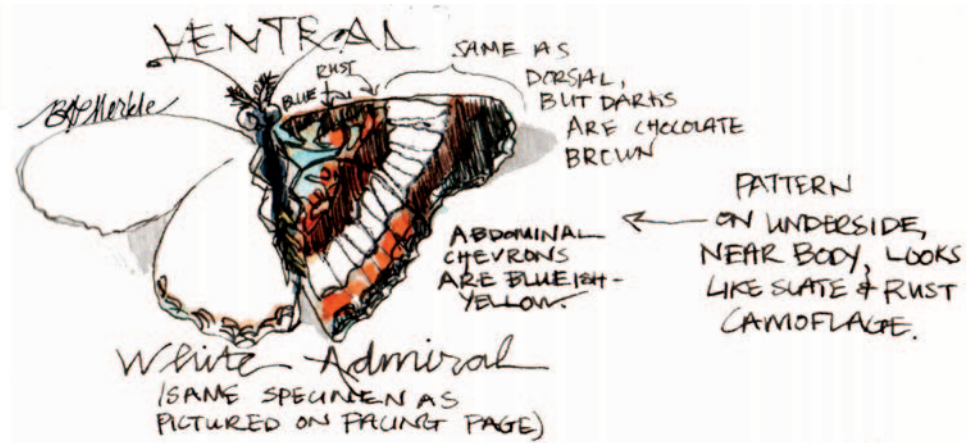
CRANES GRAZING IN LUNGT SSW 08 MAY 2013



After spending time sketching something, you might want to add a bit of color. Keeping color simple can help your sketch look "on purpose"—a great incentive for drawing again tomorrow.

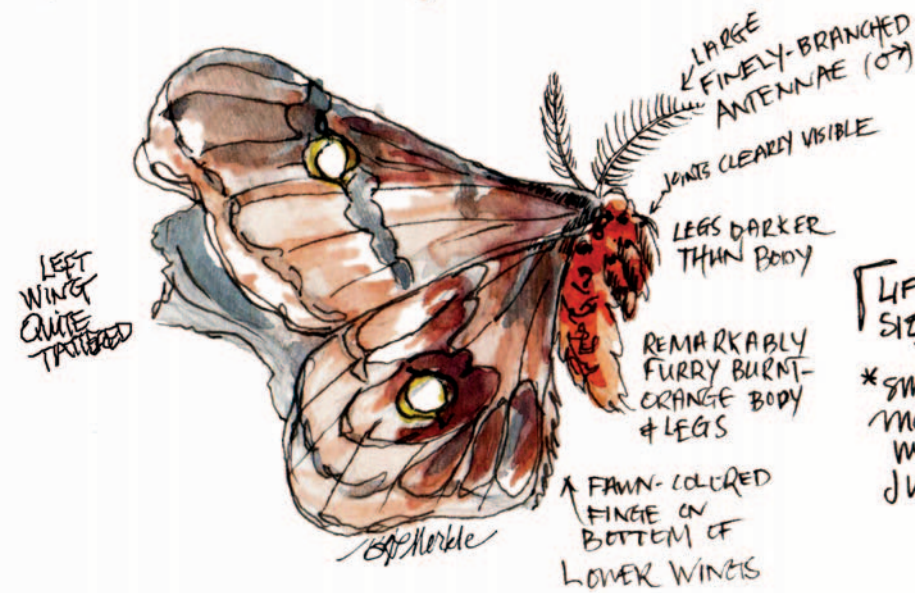
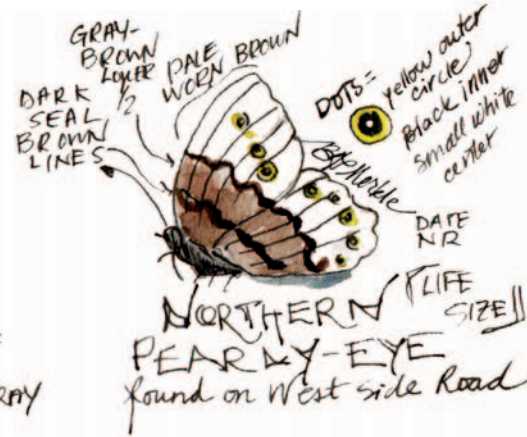
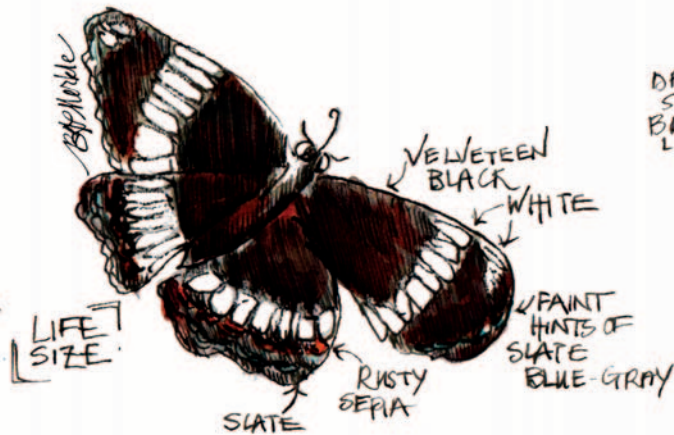


Use sketching as a type of conversation with yourself about nature. Jot down questions and observations—Why is this butterfly so large compared to others? How did this log get so dark on one side? How come that red squirrel never sits still? When sketching, you notice things you may have never noticed before, which naturally raises your curiosity about the object and its shape, color, and texture—not to mention what it's doing there in the first place.



POLYPNEUSTES MOTH
 found in driveway near garage on 22 July 2013. legs are still quivering & occasional breathing is visible, but otherwise it is motionless. Like that for several hours. Evidently they live only ~1 week as an adult.
 Color is variable, but reverses on wings are consistent. Moth is named after a cyclops in Greek mythology.

WHITE ADMIRAL
 (LIMITIS ARTEMIS)
 found dead near garage - DATE NR.



LIFE SIZE*
 *smaller than mating pair we saw in June

Then sketch the object a few more times focusing on the interior details, not the outline. Finally, add extra marks or scribble in a different texture to reflect places where there are shadows, differences in color, and surface texture. Don't look at your paper until you have done 15 quick sketches.

5. Trace small things.

Place a shell, seed, leaf, twig, or other small object on a piece of paper and simply trace around it. This helps you learn the basic shape and texture. If you want, you can then add details into that outline.

6. Add notes and questions.

Embrace your natural curiosity by scribbling down questions about your sketches. Like "Why is this twig so dark on this side?" or "How could this stone have a hole in it?" Consider adding notes or descriptions of

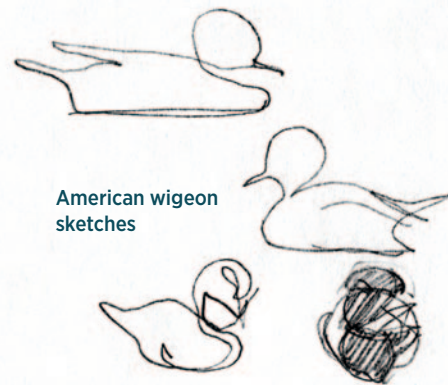
color, size, shape, texture, smell, location, and more.

7. Add color, but sparingly.

Color can add a lot to a sketch, but it's an extra complication when you're just starting. You can simplify (and lighten your load) by adding just one color—like yellow for the petals of a yellow flower. Then move on to only two colors, like red and brown for sandhill cranes.

To get better at sketching what you see in nature, you must keep sketching. If you feel unsuccessful or frustrated, you probably won't keep at it. The techniques I've shared here take the emphasis away from "getting it perfect" and focus more on seeing and thinking—which is what nature study is all about. They also let you short-cut your way to sketches that look like you made deliberate

choices. If you did it on purpose (made a lovely scribble, traced something, placed words alongside, used just one color for a pop of emphasis), you must have meant it to look that way. How delightful! Do another sketch. Hopefully, on and on you'll go, using sketching as a way to connect with more of the nuance and beauty of Montana.



PORTRAIT PHOTO BY PRISCILLA WIGGINGTON

The author sketching in the field.

Helpful resources

Find additional advice and suggestions for sketching on my website: commnatural.com/blog/categories/sketching-tip.

► Nature artist and writer John Muir Laws has a website loaded with videos on how to sketch and keep a nature journal: johnmuirlaws.com/introduction-to-nature-journaling-video/.

► Books by field journal artists like Cathy Johnson, Hannah Hinchman, and Clare Walker Leslie offer advice and inspiration. Just be sure to use them as a tool, not a ruler. Don't compare yourself to them; they've been professional nature artists for decades.

