

NATURE JOURNALING

TREE STRUCTURE AND BENEFITS Grades: K-8

Overview:

Nature journaling is the practice of recording one's observations of natural things during their time outside. The observations can consist of anything—birds, trees, plants, rocks, insects, mammals, weather etc. and is a very simple and effective tool for advancing observational skills and understanding ecological patterns. Nature journaling is most successful when it is practiced over a long period of time where seasonal changes, weather patterns, symbiotic relationships and any other environmental variations within the urban forest can be observed. Keeping a journal just for this purpose is recommended, so that your students can reflect, research and keep track of any questions they may have.

Method:

1. Choose an Outdoor Area:

Find an area outside on campus that allows your class to spread out. Be sure to set a boundary so students know where they can go and what's off limits. Allow students several minutes to find a spot they feel connected to before settling in.

2. Record Date, Time, Location, and Weather Conditions:

Before they get started, have your students write the date, time, location, and weather conditions somewhere on their paper. This is a vital part of nature journaling, so students can reflect back on a certain day and know the setting.

3. Conduct a Sit Spot for Observation:

Have students take a few minutes to do a simple sit spot. No journaling just yet—only observing nature and expanding their senses. This will help bring awareness to everything that's going on in their surroundings.

4. Record Observations:

After a few minutes sitting quietly, have students record their observations. This can be done through writing, sketching, coloring, painting, etc. Remind students that they do not need to know what it is they are observing, as that can be researched later. Emphasize that these sketches don't need to look "pretty"—the goal is to expand awareness through observation.

5. Repeat the Activity Regularly:

Repeat this nature journaling activity as often as possible. Creating a weekly 20-minute routine will promote mental health, increase students' ability to focus, and foster a connection with nature.

*6. Optional Activity: Mindful Forest Walk Video:

If going outside is not possible due to rain or other circumstances, show students a "mindful forest walk" video instead to provide a similar experience.

At a glance

Skills:

Critical Thinking
Discussion
Urban Forestry
Journaling

Lesson Delivery:

(Best/Suggested
method in bold)

- Whole group
- Small group
- **Independent work**

Location:

(Best/Suggested
location in bold)

- **Outdoor**
- Indoors

Materials:

Necessary

- Paper/Journal
- Colored Pencils
- Pencils/Pen
- Table/writing surface

Optional

- Markers
- Water Colors
- Trace Paper
- Crayons

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Modifications & Extensions

K-2*

 **Modification:** Use a **guided journal** page with simple fill-in-the-blank prompts and drawing boxes:

- "Today I see ____"
- "I hear ____"
- "The weather feels ____"
- "I wonder ____"
- Include icons (sun, cloud, tree, ear, etc.) to support emerging readers and allow students to draw pictures if needed.

Extension: "Ask a Tree"

After journaling, students choose something they observed and write a question to it (e.g., "Tree, how old are you?"). Share questions as a class to spark curiosity and wonder.

3-5*

 **Modification: 5 Senses Observation Checklist:**

- I saw...
- I heard...
- I smelled...
- I felt...
- I wondered...
- Students choose how to document: bullet list, labeled sketch, or a paragraph.

Extension: "One Small Square"

Study – Students focus on one small area of nature (like a patch of grass or tree bark) and describe or sketch in high detail. Return to the same spot over time to observe change.

6-8*

 **Modification: Use reflective prompts to deepen observation:**

- "What patterns or relationships do you notice?"
- "What's one interaction happening in this environment?"
- "What might this space look like in another season?"

Extension: Phenology Journaling

Students return to the same location weekly to track and document seasonal or ecological changes (e.g., leaf color, animal behavior, flower blooms). Compile data over time to reflect on patterns.

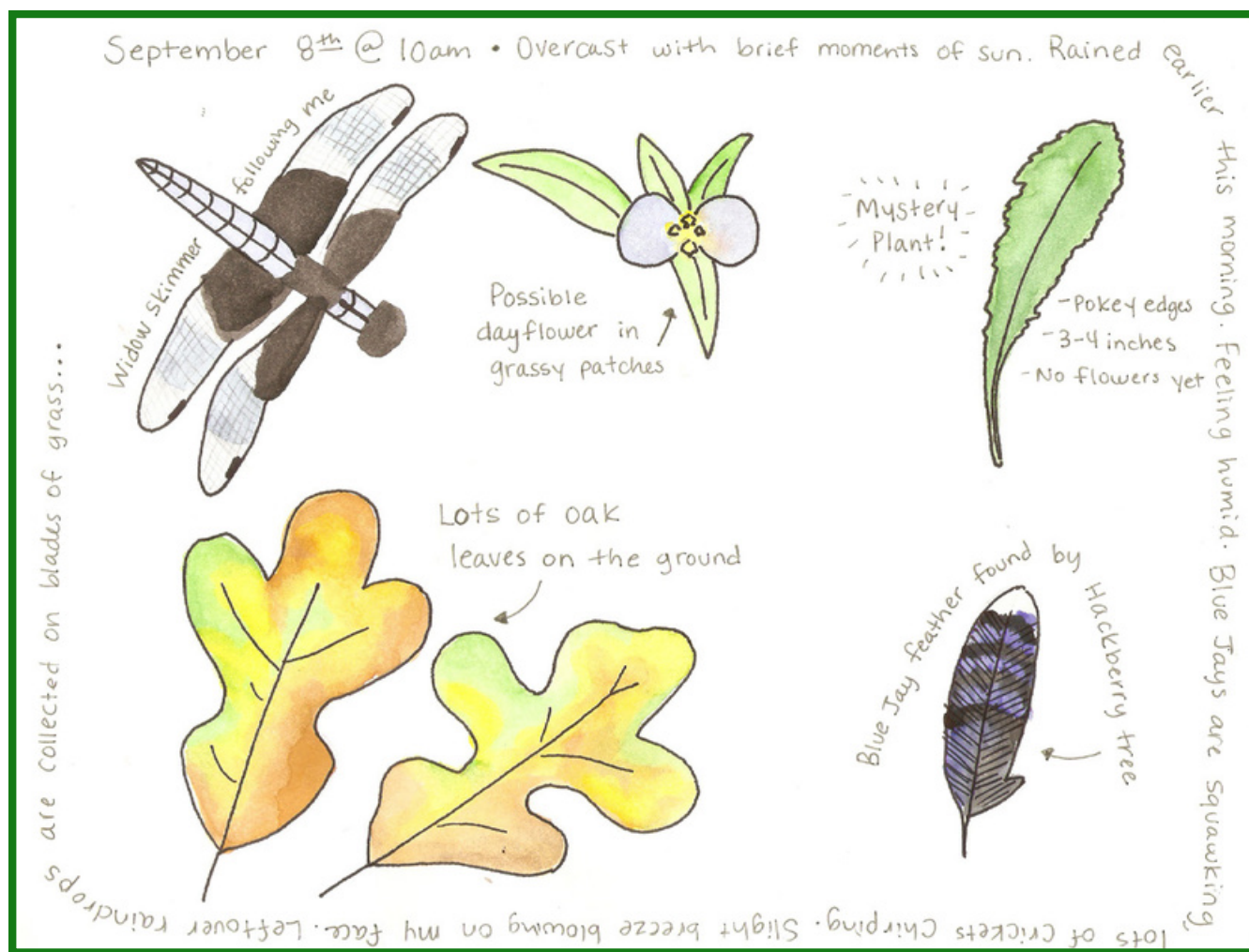
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Some Essential Questions to Consider:

- **Trees-** What are the leaves doing (any color change, loss or growth)? Is there flowers or fruit on the trees? Are there any birds, mammals or insects using the tree? What kind of benefits are the trees providing at this point in the season?
- **Birds, Mammals and Insects-** Can you see or hear them? Do you see their habitat (nest, burrow, web)? What kind of weather are they more noticeable in? What are they eating?
- **Weather and Seasons-** What kinds of seasonal patterns do you notice? Can you identify the season using a sense other than sight? How is the weather impacting the urban forest?

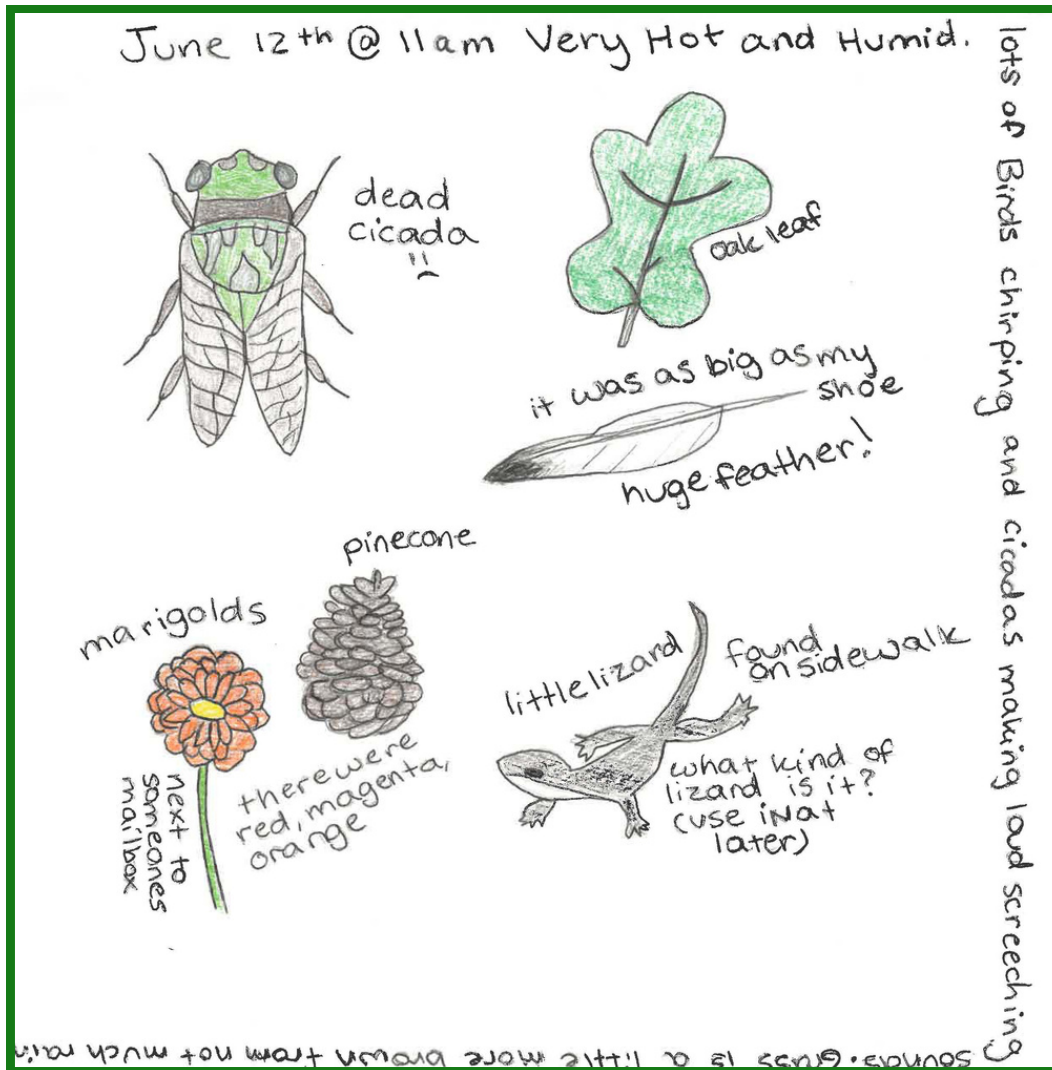
Example:



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Example 2:



Nature Journaling:
The practice of
recording
observations, thoughts,
drawings, and notes
about nature

Use prompts:

I notice...

I wonder....

It reminds me of...