



The Urban Field Naturalists' guide to

NATURE STORYTELLING



THE PANDEMIC EDITION

The Urban Field Naturalist Project is a collaboration between researchers from Design, Environmental Humanities, and Life and Environmental sciences. The project aims to encourage city-dwellers of all ages to engage with local biodiversity, by sharing short stories about personal encounters with urban wildlife. These stories can include photographs, drawings, audio recordings or videos as well as writing.

This guide is designed to help you turn your nature observations into engaging short stories, to share with your community and maybe have your story published on the Urban Field Naturalist website: www.urbanfieldnaturalist.org

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Becoming an URBAN FIELD NATURALIST in
A FEW SIMPLE STEPS



Rebecca Solnit
A Field Guide to Getting Lost, 2005.

Rebecca Giggs
Fathoms: The world in the whale 2020.

‘NATURE’ IS NOT SOMETHING WE VISIT on weekend trips to the beach or bush walks. Wildlife exists all around us; in our backyards, balconies, local parks and disused industrial areas. The urban environment is home to a diverse array of other living creatures, from ants, spiders, and snails, to birds, possums, lizards, and even those wayward weeds emerging through cracks in the footpath.

If we pay attention, each of them is an invitation into a unique and intricate mode of life, into an entire world of growth and decay, of communication and sensation, going on right under our noses.

1. SLOW DOWN



There is a world of activity going on all around us; take the time to pause and really pay attention. Even the soil beneath our feet is home to a startling variety of diverse creatures. When we **SLOW DOWN**, we move beyond the immediately obvious and visible, small things become noticeable and we can appreciate everything in a finer and more nuanced grain. This kind of attention requires us to spend the time necessary to see slow-motion processes unfold, but it also allows us to tune into things that are happening so rapidly that if you blink you might miss them. When we **SLOW DOWN** it is easier to appreciate the living world in all its diverse scales and paces.

CREATIVE ACTIVITY BOOKS FOR KIDS:
 Kerri Smith
How To Be an Explorer of the World 2011.
 AND
The Wanderer Society 2016.
 YOUNG ADULT NOVELS:
 Dara McAnulty
Diary of a Young Naturalist, 2020.

Tara June Winch
The Yield, 2019.
 (16 years+)

A.J. Betts
Hive, 2018.

ILLUSTRATED NOVEL:
 Reif Larsen
The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet, 2010.

ALSO A FILM:
The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2013.

OBSERVATION/DESIGN BOOK:
 Alan Fletcher
The Art of Looking Sideways: A primer in visual intelligence 2001.



2. OBSERVE

We can hone our skills at really paying attention to what is happening in front of us and around us. Use all your senses to **OBSERVE** closely. Watch for those small movements, those tiny differences. Which insects are visiting this particular flower, what are they up to? Listen carefully to how a bird’s call changes in different circumstances. Smell the different scents on the wind at a given time of day or season. We might even touch and taste the world around us, too (*when we know it is safe to do so—don’t go tasting mysterious plants or mushrooms*). To **OBSERVE** in this way is to go well beyond creating an inventory of the particular species we’ve spotted; it is to take the first step towards crafting new understandings.

3. RECORD AND COLLECT

A.S. Byatt
Possession
2020.

Susan Orlean
The Orchid Thief
1998

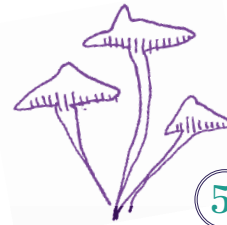
Charlie Kaufman /
Spike Jonze
Adaptation
2002

Kate Fletcher,
'An Interview
with River Dean'
Fashion Theory (24).
2020.

We can keep close records of observations in a variety of ways, from writing or drawing in a field journal to a photograph, a video, or an audio recording. Whatever way we **RECORD AND COLLECT**, it's a good idea to keep track of when and where things occurred, perhaps also the weather and environmental conditions. In general, the more detail we're able to capture, the better; we often don't know what is most interesting or important about an observation until later. Videos, in particular, can allow us to revisit a particular interaction or behaviour, to slow it down and pause, to listen and glean things that we might otherwise have missed. There are also now a variety of online biodiversity databases—such as iNaturalist and eBird—that allow us to both record and share observations.

4. ASK QUESTIONS

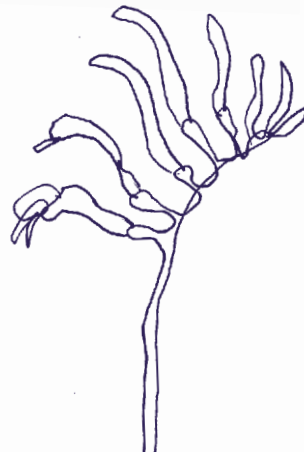
Cultivate curiosity about why the things we're observing are as they are. This requires us to move beyond absorbing facts and experiences and into a genuine inquisitiveness about what they mean: **ASK QUESTIONS**. Why are some animals more abundant on some days? Why do some plants thrive in cities and others disappear? The more we observe and learn, the more we realise we don't know, and the better our questions become. Becoming curious about the 'why' behind what animals and plants do makes everything more interesting.



5. SHARE

We can pass our observations, our insights, and our questions on to others. There is a whole world of interested people out there who we might learn from—or even have something to teach. Our observations might be invaluable to others; they might feed into a broader web of information that helps us all, as a community, to see and understand the world a little differently. Some of the online biodiversity databases mentioned above provide a platform not just for recording but to **SHARE** and discuss observations.

Of course, you can also send your short story to The Urban Field Naturalist Project, for possible publication: UrbanFieldNaturalist@gmail.com



Finally, we begin the process again, with all that we have learnt informing our efforts to appreciate and understand our living world in all its complexity, beauty and rawness.

RESOURCE:

8 Aboriginal Ways
of Learning:
www.8ways.online

PODCAST:

David G. Haskell
'Eleven Ways of
Smelling a Tree',
Emergence Magazine
2020.

DOCUMENTARIES (NETFLIX):

Pippa Ehrlich and
James Reed
My Octopus Teacher
2020.

Jeff Orlowski
Chasing Coral
2017.

David Attenborough
A Life on Our Planet
2020.

DRAWING TUTORIALS:

Julia Rothman
*Drawing Nature
(Even When You're
Stuck Indoors)*
[www.storey.com/article/
drawing-nature-indoors/](http://www.storey.com/article/drawing-nature-indoors/)

Writing Tips

Tips and resources for writing engaging stories.

READ.

Reading other writers' work can improve your writing by showing you new ways to approach storytelling. Read stories on the [Urban Field Naturalist site](#), but also explore nature writing more generally. The 'Simple Steps' part of this guide includes resources and recommended reading. Visit your local bookshop or library and ask for recommendations, or start with these collections:

Australian owned book retailer Readings recommended Nature Writing: www.readings.com.au/collection/recommended-nature-writing

Sydney Review of Books' New Nature essay collection: sydneyreviewofbooks.com/project/new-nature/



KEEP A JOURNAL.

Journaling can help sharpen your observation skills, and practice creative writing techniques. Perhaps you will have different sections in your journal for 'field notes' (*noting what you encounter*) and 'creative writing' (*exploring ways to turn your observations into engaging stories*). Writing is a skill that takes practice; the more you write, the easier it gets. Use the prompts in this guide (see pages 6 and 7) as a starting point. See also:

[Tips on keeping a scientific field journal](#), Eleanor Sterling for the American Museum of Natural History.

Keri Smith's [How to Be an Explorer of the World](#) is a more creative take on field notes, with interactive prompts appealing to all ages.



START OR JOIN A WRITING GROUP.

This is a great way to set writing goals and make yourself stick to them, as well as share tips on the writing process and get inspiration from other people's approaches. You could start a nature writing group; arrange to take walks together and later workshop the stories you write about your encounters in nature.

TAKE A CLASS.

Improve your writing with online resources and/or storytelling courses.

For example:

- The NSW Writers' Centre's Nature Writing with Inga Simpson: writingnsw.org.au/whats-on/courses/online-nature-writing-writing-workshop
- Learn from writers such as Margaret Atwood, Joyce Carol Oates, Salman Rushdie or Malcolm Gladwell in the MasterClass series: www.masterclass.com/categories#writing
- [Check out this Literary Techniques Toolkit](#) (see also the [Visual Techniques](#) and [Film Techniques](#) toolkits): www.matrix.edu.au/essential-guide-english-techniques/the-literary-techniques-toolkit

For examples of **writing evocative descriptions of place**, explore the Sydney Review of Books long-form collection on 'Writing Place': sydneyreviewofbooks.com/project/writing-place

In particular:

ROSS GIBSON

'Flow Charts: Alexandria'

In this essay, Gibson writes magically about how night-walks through the suburb of Alexandria give him:

... regular epiphanies, startling little bursts of beauty or revelation that gleam out in sombre-soft places that scowl differently in the day-glare.



VANESSA BERRY

'Excavating St Peters'

See also Berry's blog and book of shorter place-based writing: mirrorsydney.wordpress.com

Sydney Park, with its curved expanses of grass and pockets of trees, is a verdant moonscape, a constructed topography of rises and falls. From the top of the highest hill the park seems caught between the city skyline and Botany Bay to the south, where at night the airport glows with a sulphurous aura. It is a place to look out from as much as to consider what is underfoot. Rumour has it that somewhere in the park is the skeleton of a circus elephant, buried here during the park's days as a rubbish tip in the 1970s, along with the polystyrene cups, milk bottles and broken toys that filled the city's trash bags. Versions of the elephant story exist across generations. It was the reverse in the 1950s, with the story circulating that an elephant skeleton had instead been found in the park.

ELLEN VAN NEERVEN

'North and South'

On negotiating feelings of displacement and privilege in relation to place:

A viewpoint of the region, up here at the lighthouse. Soft sandy beaches below. Forest beyond. Paradise of seafood and wildlife, rainforest fruits, shelters, clean water. Over time, narratives have layered and wrapped around land and mob. The water came one day, and left a shoulder, the promontory is submerged. Uncle points to Wollumbin — the cloud catcher.

Nature writing exercise № 1:

SHARING MEMORIES

WHAT YOU NEED:

- At least one other person (*can be on a phone or video call*).
- Somewhere comfortable to sit for 30-45 minutes.
- Pen/pencil and paper (*or a digital device, but no looking at social media!*).
- A drink and snacks (*optional, but highly recommended*).

- 1 Take a few minutes to think of a time you saw something in the natural world that surprised, amused, horrified or amazed you. An unusual plant, an animal doing something unexpected, an insect inside your house, an awe-inspiring cloud or sunset – anything you can think of. It could be something you saw in your backyard or balcony, local park, or on holiday. Think about: →
- 2 Take turns telling your stories to each other. Spend 2 or 3 minutes describing the plant, animal or thing you observed in as much detail as you can. Talk to each other about the most interesting parts of the story, or how you might make the story more interesting for a reader.
- 3 Write the story in your notebook. Think about the conversations you had with each other about how to make the story more interesting. Could you include a drawing of what you remember, or a map or diagram to show where it was, or how something moved about a space or interacted with other creatures?

In this story, the author has included her own photograph (bottom) as well as a public domain image from Wiki Commons (top). If you include images that you have not taken or drawn yourself, make sure you have permission from the copyright holder.

PROMPTS

- What caught your attention?
- Where were you when you encountered it?
- What were you doing when you noticed it?
- Who were you with?
- Did you take a photo or video?
- Did you tell someone about it?
- How did it make you feel?



Firoo02, GFDL 1.2, via Wikimedia Commons

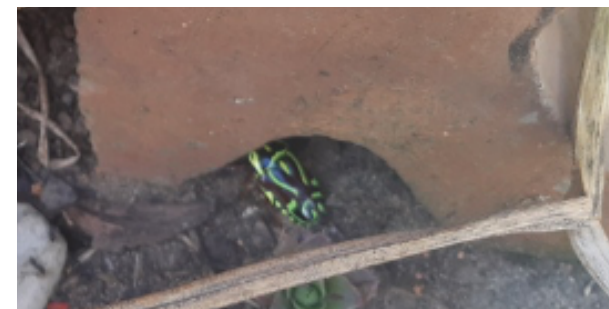
→ **EXAMPLE** from the Urban Field Naturalist site:
Little Discoveries in the Garden by Danielle Corrie

“There’s a beetle!” a little voice said excitedly from beside me. “There is too. I haven’t seen that type of beetle before,” I reply looking down at a plant in front of us.

The only brightly coloured beetle I have previously seen is a Christmas beetle. However, this beetle isn’t one of those. Christmas beetles have disappeared in recent times, unlike when I was a little girl where they’d fly in the front door on a hot summer’s night.

I kneel down to get a closer look at this little beetle, fluorescent green and black striped with a distinct pattern on its back, and quickly take a photo and video of it. At the same time I notice the beetle’s determination in trying to balance and stay upright on the stem. This beetle is not giving up. It flaps its wings frantically before retaining its balance once more, then takes one step forward, then another, evading ants at the same time.

This beetle isn’t just any beetle. What I have in my garden is an *Eupoecila australasiae*, native to Eastern Australia and more commonly known as a Fiddler’s beetle, due to the pattern on its back resembling a violin.



Nature writing exercise № 2:

Turning OBSERVATIONS into STORIES

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Pens/pencils and paper (or a digital device, but use flight mode to avoid distractions – try to immerse yourself in the natural world).
- Camera (smart phone camera is fine, on flight mode).
- A walking companion (optional, but recommended).
- A drink and snacks (optional, but highly recommended).

1 With your notebook and writing tools, go for a (safe) walk. You could wander around your garden, a local park, or just walk around the block. Notice birds, insects, clouds, weeds, trees, flowers – anything alive and non-human. Remember to use all your senses, not just your eyes. When you encounter something noteworthy, take some creative field notes:

2 Back home, read over your notes. If possible, share your encounter with someone in a conversation (see exercise one). Then, try to write a description of your encounter, in roughly 200 words.

If you have photographs, videos, audio recordings or drawings, include these in your story. Think about where you could put these in the story to either show readers what and where you observed, or to create suspense or interest.

3 Share your story. Send it to someone, post it on social media (using #urbanfieldnaturalist), or submit it to the Urban Field Naturalist project: www.urbanfieldnaturalist.org/contribute

Click the link to see the story on the Urban Field Naturalist site, it includes an audio recording of the ring-necked parakeets the author can hear, with a slideshow of images showing her urban environment and the birds she can spot.



→ **EXAMPLE** from the Urban Field Naturalist site:
Soundscapes of Lockdown by Filipa Soares

Locked down in a flat in Lisbon on a high fourth floor, with no backyard nor balcony, it was through my (thankfully big) windows that for months I experienced the natural world outside. Inevitably, what I noticed the most were the birds.

Amongst the flying silhouettes and polyphonic sounds of sparrows, blackbirds, goldfinches, seagulls, kestrels and probably others that my limited bird watching skills could not identify, there was one sound that caught my attention: the shrill sound of flocks of ring-necked parakeets, which contrasted with the silence of empty streets.

Originally from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent, ring-necked parakeets had established in Lisbon by the 1980s. Similar to other European cities, in Lisbon the population of this popular pet species presumably originated from birds that escaped from cages or were deliberately released. These green and very noisy birds have since taken over many of the gardens and parks throughout the city, including the one near my home, in the northern part of Lisbon. It was from there that the flocks that I saw and heard every morning during lockdown flew in search for food, returning before sunset.

This 'exotic' species became part of the soundscapes of the city, the neighbourhood and, at least for me, of lockdown.

PROMPTS

What is it? *If you don't know, describe it.*

Can you sketch, photograph or film it?

What is it doing?

Is it alone or in a group?

How is it interacting with other species and/or the environment?

Where are you? *Be as descriptive as you can, don't just note the suburb or street, but describe the place as if to someone who has never been there. Sketch, photograph, video or audio record the scene and object you are observing.*

Who are you with? Who else is around?

What were you doing when you noticed it?

How does it make you feel?

WE CAN TELL STORIES USING WORDS, IMAGES, OR A COMBINATION OF BOTH. Sometimes a photograph or drawing of an encounter with nature can make a written story more engaging, or it could be a way to tell a story without using any words at all. We can also use sketches and drawings as a way to take field notes. You don't need to be 'good at drawing' to take visual field notes, you need to be a good observer.

In these exercises, you will sit and observe birds or insects (or other animals you share space with), then test some different ways to sketch your observations. The point is not to draw highly realistic pictures, but to sketch how the creatures are moving, interacting with each other and the space.

Nature sketching warm up:

WHAT YOU NEED:

→ Somewhere comfortable to sit, outside or inside with a view.

Be still. Observe with all your senses.

Start by sitting quietly in the space for several minutes, observing what's happening around you. If you're in a group, one person could read the instructions aloud, or read them to yourself:

Have your notebook and drawing tools close to hand, but don't hold them yet. Shuffle around until you are comfortable.

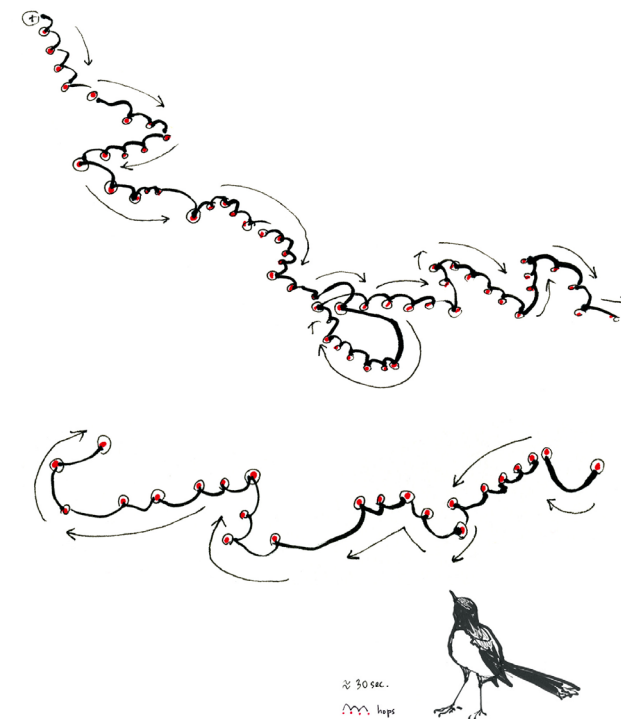
You might concentrate on your breath for a few moments, feeling your chest rise and fall, the soft sound of your exhale.

Notice your feet or legs making contact with the ground, grounding you.

Let your gaze wander, trying not to focus on any one thing.

Allow yourself to notice the environment around you. Shapes, colours, textures, smells, sounds.

Be still for a while. Look and listen.



EXAMPLE from the Urban Field Naturalist site:
Willy Wagtail Hop Maps, Zoë Sadokierski

Sitting on the grassy slope behind the farmhouse, pen in hand, I wait for the sheep to move. I am at Coorah, a property in central west NSW, with Tom Lee, whose family have farmed this land for six generations, and our colleague Jacquie Kasunic. For three days we are here bumping about in the ute, pushing through burr-starred paddocks, scrambling up rocks scabbed with lichen; Tom describes the land and history of things on it while Jacquie and I document: she with camera, me with pen. I wait for the sheep to move. I want to replicate an exercise described in Chester Eagle's *Mapping the Paddocks* in which he maps the movement of sheep, but it is heavily hot. Sheep, it seems, are unmappably docile in this heat. The entire landscape is so still it might be an Arthur Streeton painting. Then on the grass in front of me, a willy wagtail hops. Pauses. Shakes its tail feathers, hops again. Calls—a peculiar scratchy-squeak which is often described as 'sweet pretty creature' but reminds me of a baby's rattle. I put pen to paper and map the movement. Over and over, entranced.

Nature sketching exercise: QUICK SKETCHES

To practice looking at the world more than the page, start with a few 'continuous line drawings'. These will be messy, go with it!

WHAT YOU NEED:

- ➔ Somewhere comfortable to sit, outside or inside with a view.
- ➔ Pens / pencils and paper (or a digital device, but use flight mode to avoid distractions – try to immerse yourself in the natural world).
- ➔ Camera (smart phone camera is fine, but again, flight mode).
- ➔ A drink and some snacks (optional, but highly recommended).

Exercise 1: Continuous Line Drawing

- ➔ Place your pen or pencil in the middle of the page, and look in front of you.
- ➔ Without taking your pen or pencil off the paper, draw what you can see.
- ➔ Try not to look at the page, move your hand and your eyes at the same time. The point is to draw fast, not well – don't worry about what it looks like.
- ➔ Repeat with different types of pen/pencils.

REFLECTION:

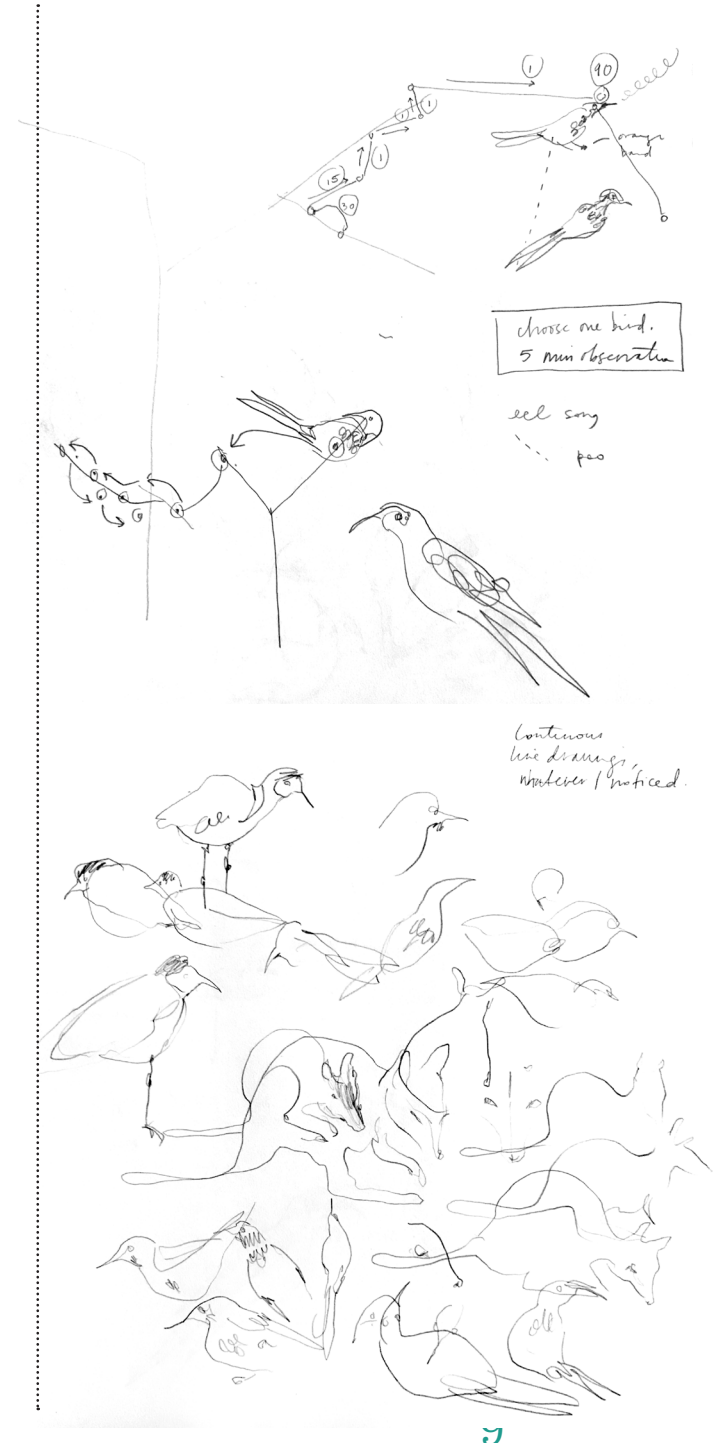
- How does it feel to draw quickly?*
- Did you find it difficult to do a drawing that looks 'bad'?*
- Which types of pen/pencil felt best to draw with?*
- Which would you choose to take in a 'field sketching kit'?*

Exercise 2: Sketching movement

- ➔ Choose one bird or insect to observe. Watch it for a moment, observing how it moves.
- ➔ In the middle of your page, draw an X where your creature is.
- ➔ Trying to keep your pen on the page, every time your creature moves, draw a line to where it stops. You will need to keep looking quickly between the page and the scene.
- ➔ Choose a different coloured pen, and repeat the exercise, with the same or a different creature. Some will move faster and more frequently than others. Note which creature is which colour – you might want to draw a 'key' on the side of the page.

REFLECTION:

- Was it difficult to look at both the page and the creature?*
- Did some move more and/or faster than others?*
- Was it difficult to focus on one creature at a time?*



Nature sketching exercise: NEW PERSPECTIVES

Choose one to observe and draw: a tree or plant, bird, insect or animal. Choose something relatively still.

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Somewhere comfortable to sit, outside or inside with a view.
- Pens / pencils and paper (or a digital device, but use flight mode).
- A drink and some snacks (optional, but highly recommended).

Exercise 3: Timed sketches

Sit and draw the plant/animal for different amounts of time. Don't worry about 'finishing' each drawing. The point is to look and sketch quickly – you might choose one part or feature of the thing to focus on. Set a timer and draw for:

- 10 seconds
- 20 seconds
- 30 seconds
- 1 minute
- 5 minutes
- Now repeat the process, starting at 10 seconds.

REFLECTION:

*Did you notice new things the longer you sketched?
Was it easier the second time?
What did you do differently?*

Exercise 4: Sketching perspectives

Now, make a few sketches of your chosen plant/animal, taking two different perspectives:

- Bird's eye view – look down (or imagine looking down) as if you were a bird flying above.
- Worm's eye view – look up (or imagine looking up) as if you were a worm in the ground.

REFLECTION:

*Did taking different perspectives change what you saw?
How?*

