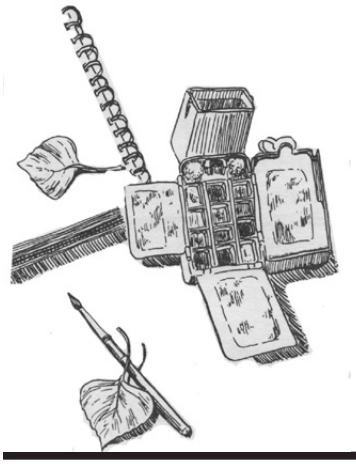

Discoveries

News and views from Discovery Southeast Fall 1998

The art of noticing

Kathy Hocker

"From not being able to draw . . . a great pile of manuscript which I made during the voyage has proved almost useless." — Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*.

Darwin notwithstanding, a great many scientists and naturalists *have* drawn. Before portable photography equipment, explorers depended on drawings to keep visual record of new places, flora and fauna. Modern naturalists and scientists have continued this tradition, using sketches to enliven and enhance their notes. Atop Sentinel Dome in Yosemite, John Muir sketched the looping path of a "singing, dancing grasshopper" and added sound effects. Olaus Murie sat for days on the tundra, sketching and taking notes on bears, wolves, and caribou. Scottish naturalist and artist Keith Brockie crept up to nesting seabirds.

If you asked me when I became a field sketching fanatic, I'd have to say it began some nine years ago with a pink salmon. It was the height of summer and the fish were thick in Trap Creek, Chichagof Island. On a trek to the beach one afternoon, I nearly stumbled across one, freshly abandoned by the high tide in the estuary sedge. Struck by the juxtaposition of strong and soft colors on his side, I went back to the cabin to get my watercolors and some paper. I sketched his fins and tail, the strong arch of his back, the comers of his hooked mouth; I tried to capture the exquisite colors of his flanks. I had lived in Alaska for fifteen of my twenty-one years—had fished in creek and ocean for most of those fifteen —and I had never before noticed pink salmon.

Drawing in nature is about noticing. It's about slowing down the chatter in the mind and allowing the real world in. It's getting eye-to-blossom with a nagoonberry, recording the emergence of a mayfly, celebrating the sweet curve of a kinglet's wing. Noticing can lead to constant questions (why did its leaves fold like that? How does she build that nest? Where does he go in the winter?), and even some answers (so *there's* where its gills are! *Here's* where they all come from . . .).

For Richard Carstensen, art is a way of seeing. He finds that when he has been drawing for some time, he notices repeating forms and patterns in seemingly unrelated objects: the folds of a mushroom's gills, the pattern on the underside of a lungwort. To him, drawing nature tugs the naturalist beyond taxonomic knowledge of the world and into an understanding of the deeper connections. Jim Fowler, another of Juneau's fine artist-naturalists, finds that painting outdoors is, for him, a connection with nature that others might find in hunting or farming. "*It's personal involvement beyond just passing through,*" Jim says. "*I feel different about a place if I've painted it.*"

Field sketching isn't just for artists. Many people who plead "I can't draw" in most situations are less intimidated by sketching outdoors. This is because the goal of field sketching is not necessarily to create a realistic representation, but to use the process of drawing to learn more. The actual picture that results may be secondary to the insight gained from creating that picture.

Those who keep field journals find that sketches can add information that words can't express—for example, it's much easier to show

A cormorant came and let me draw it— I was able to sit quite close. It yawned and blinked at me sleepily

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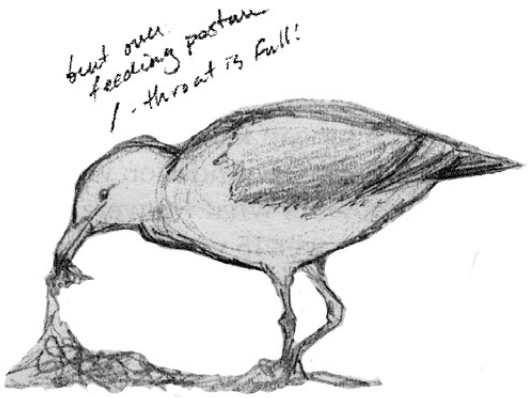
the shape of a highbush cranberry leaf than it is to describe it in words. Drawings can show processes and changes. They provide visuals for later reference. They hold memories as well; to me, opening my field notebook to certain pages brings back the sound of surf at Cascade Head, the smell of death camas flowers in Atlin, the cold brush of fog on a California hillside.



So how do you start? A simple field sketching kit might include the following: A journal (hardbound and unlined is best), your favorite pencil or pencils, and an eraser. You also might want to include any color media you want to experiment with (watercolor, colored pencil, pastel, etc.), any special papers you'd like to work on, artists' tape, a black felt-tip pen, brushes and a bottle of water, and a small ruler for size notes.

It can be rather scary to grip pencil in hand and stare at a blank sheet of paper. Here are some thoughts that may help with the beginning jitters:

Stop. Watch. Wait. When you sit down to draw something—be it plant, animal, or landscape—take at least ten or fifteen minutes to study it before you even set pencil to paper. This will allow the subject at hand to displace any inaccurate pictures you might carry in your brain. It will also allow you to get to know your subject from several angles, or in several positions. This understanding of structure will show through in your drawing.

Try the unfamiliar. In her watershed book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, Betty Edwards points out that we all carry mental stereotypes of what we think things look like. These stereotypes are often very different from reality, and the strongest-held ones concern things that we are most intimately familiar with. To break free of these preconceptions, try starting by drawing things that you have no stereotypes for. Choose an unfamiliar plant or invertebrate, rather than a mammal. You'll be forced to draw what you see, not what you think you see.

Try different media. When Jenny Keller, my field-sketching instructor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, required us to do at least ten pages of field sketches in pen, I was terrified. But once I put aside my pencil, I found it something of a relief. Why be tentative when you can't erase? Pen sketching is bold and exciting, and if you hate it, you can always just turn the page and start again. Pens with watersoluble ink are great; you can brush water into your sketch for ink-wash effects.

Experiment also with watercolor, pastels, or acrylics to add color to your sketch journals. A great antidote to the "blank white page jitters" is toned paper, which I sketch on with colored pencils, then tape into my field journals. The colored background is much friendlier than the cold white page. You can work both lighter and darker than the background color, for a more three-dimensional feel.

Simplify. No matter how you love the extravagant detail of that forest with the sunlight bursting through the devil's club, the bright clumps of highbush cranberry, and the thrushes flitting about, you can't record every detail in a sketch. To record everything visible is the job of a photograph or a large finished piece. To capture a scene in a sketch, try to pick out the essential character of it. Squint at the scene to pick out the fundamental lights and darks without distraction from details. You can also use a viewfinder to choose a small portion of the scene.

Don't worry. Consider your field journal a private thing . . . it is created by you, for you, as a learning tool. Nobody else has to see it! For some people, this can be a freeing thought. Guaranteed: for every field sketch that you love, there will be plenty that you'd

just as soon never see again. Try to keep them all; they'll help you learn more and chart your progress, but if you really do hate something, you don't have to keep it.

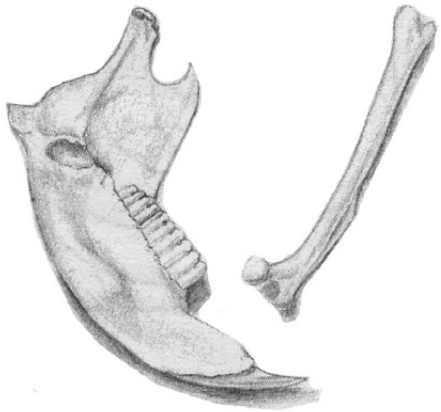
Sometimes I will go out to sketch with no particular plan in mind; I'll draw whatever I am most excited about learning from. Sometimes, I will be in search of a particular subject to learn more about. Sometimes, though, I find it useful to have a theme or format in mind; to give myself an "assignment" for a field sketching trip. Here are some of the themes that have worked best for me:

Habitat portrait. Choose a place whose structure, inhabitants, or interrelationships interest you. After exploring, watching, and absorbing it for a while without drawing, start with a sketch of the environment, then surround this with notes and sketches of interesting things you find there: birds that pass through, plants that are blooming, insects, arumal sign, textures and colors, and so on . . . Add questions and comments, and follow up on them.

Three things that . . . Find a place that attracts you and explore it to find three things that have something in common, then sketch these and take notes. Some examples are "three things that are well protected," "three plants that are not green," "three things that have spots." Of course you don't have to stop at three! This exercise is a powerful one for noticing hidden patterns and unconventional relationships.

Field notes/lD portrait. Choose a plant or animal that you do not know and draw it in the field with the idea that you will be able to use only your drawing and notes to identify it later. What will you need to know? Remember that such things as arrangement of leaves or leaf veins, habitat, number of leg segments, or root pattern can be crucial to identification.

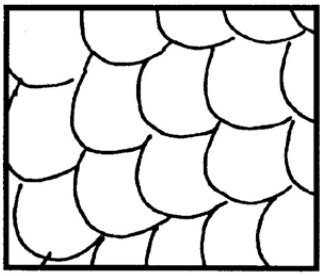
Field sketching can be a lot of things: reference for later work, practice at drawing, an excuse to sit still for a while, learning to see, seeing to learn . . . It is an intimate blend of art and science. In essence, though, it comes down to just four words, shared with me by an Auke Bay school fifth grader on a field sketching trip: *"Look what I noticed!"* The pencil and paper are powerful tools; use them, and you may be amazed at what you notice.

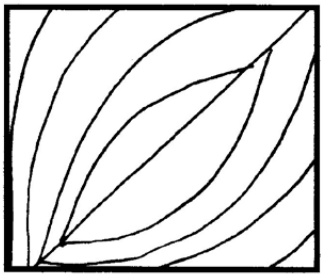


There are a number of great books on the subject of field sketching. A good place to start is The Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature by Cathy Johnson. For inspiration, pore through the sketches of Leonardo daVinci or Albrecht Durer, study Ann Zwinger's and Clare Walker Leslie's drawings, or hunt down a copy of tile (unfortunately) out of print One Man's Island by Keith Brockie.

Patterns in nature

Our natural home is full of patterns . . . the "V" of a flock of geese, ripples on the water, a spider's web . . . Some of these patterns are repeated in many different ways. Below are some examples of natural patterns you might find around Juneau. Try to find objects or scenes that contain the pattern, then sketch them, and write down what they are. For hints to get you started, see the bottom of the page . . .But remember, there is more than one answer for each!

1 

2 

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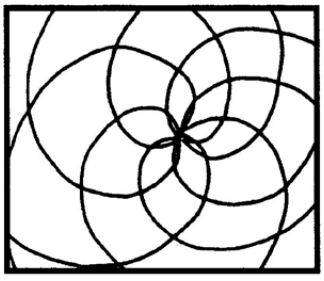
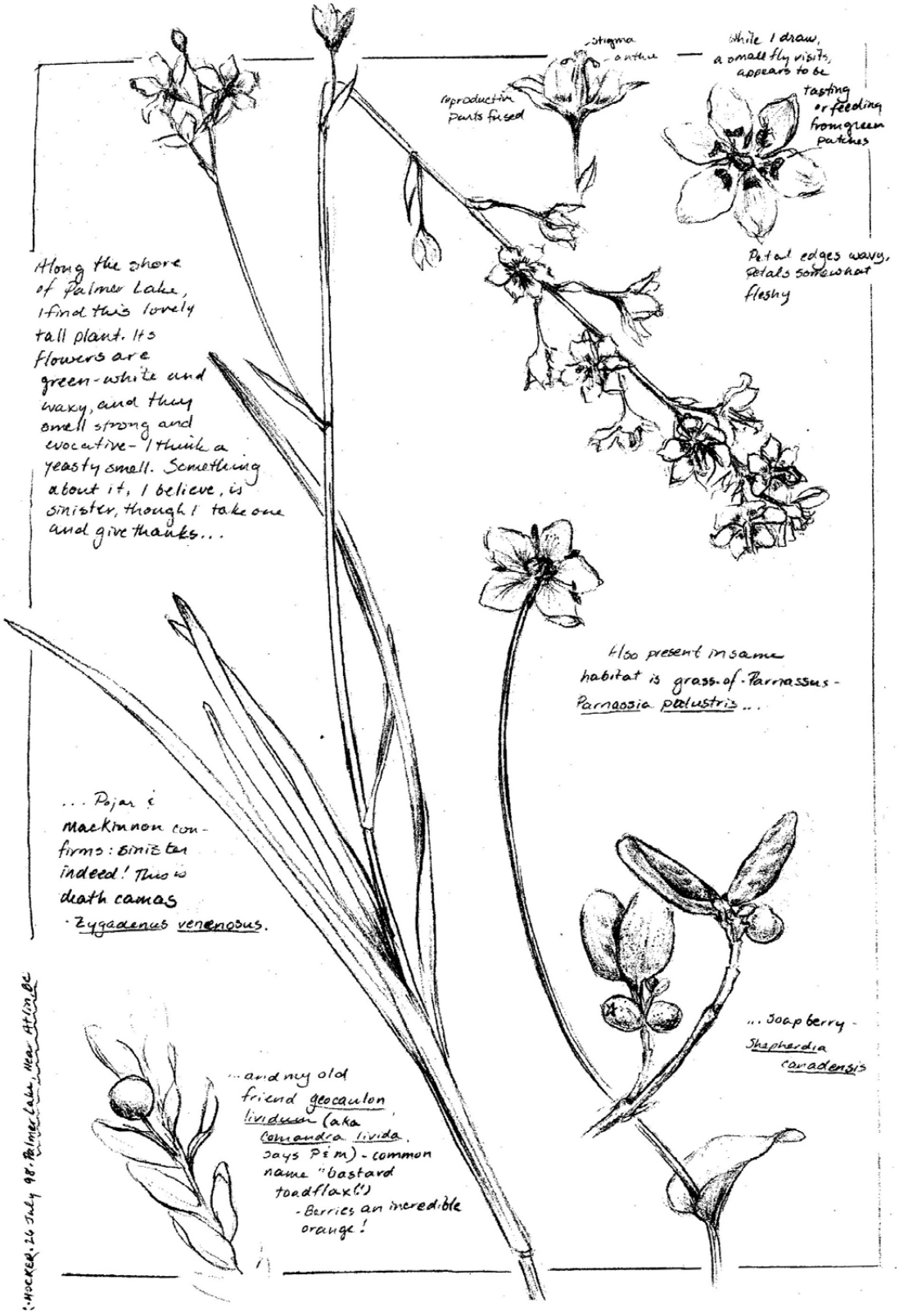
4 

Hints: Here are clues to SOME things that contain the patterns above:
1. In sea and on land. . .2. Look low in the bog. . . 3. Look up! 4. It calls to bugs.



Plants on the edge! Among the above plants (sketched on a recent trip to Atlin) are some that are "fringe" plants in Southeast Alaska. Death camas, soapberry, and *Geocaulon* are all glimpsed occasionally on the edges between our rainy maritime world and the drier interior.