

## **How to Do a Nature Journal**

**by Karen Andreola**

"Mom look. I picked these for you." What mother could resist a generous nosegay of dandelions from her loving 4-year-old? The dandelions are not new, but the children are, as they are seeing things for the first time.

Young children will eagerly discover wildflowers, toads, butterflies, beetles, paw prints in the mud, earthworms, robins, thistles, squirrels, mushrooms, berries—and run into thorn bushes—all outdoors. I remember how our back door would bang shut in spring as my children bounded into the kitchen—bright red scratches and bug bites on their arms and legs, clothes covered with grass stains—to show me their "finds." Therefore, when I contemplated further Miss Charlotte Mason's recommendation for Nature Study in 1989, I was ready to try it more formally with my students.

We started taking nature walks. One day a week they drew their finds into a Nature Journal.

### **Drawing From Nature**

Any blank book will do. If your children are early elementary age they can sketch on loose paper held on a clipboard—to be kept later in a binder.

Encourage children to "draw what they see." When children give attention to drawing they will often notice details about their finds that they wouldn't have otherwise.

Every student of Miss Mason's kept a Nature Journal—records of their personal experiences. They were assiduously inscribed with fine prose and illustrated with delicate watercolors. This is ideal. We started with colored pencils. Watercolors came later.

In 1990, the following year, while browsing a bookstore, I stumbled upon a beautiful example of the kind of Nature Journal that Miss Mason had described in her writings. It was Edith Holden's ***The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady***. I carried it home with much happiness. Although I was well aware that our drawings would be crude in comparison to Edith Holden's (who was an art student), her pages were inspiring.

### **Recording Observations**

Keep a field guide handy to identify a find. According to Miss Mason's recommendations, all drawings should include captions: the Latin name of the specimen (from the field guide) and its familiar name.

Students can record a description of their find on the opposite page. The date of the find and where they found it is basic. Children might also provide an anecdote, especially if the find is a wiggly salamander or fidgety chipmunk—something entertaining. It is difficult to draw a bird that hops from branch to branch, an ant, a butterfly, or any creature that moves perpetually. They will not pose for a sketch even if you ask them. In these modern times taking a photograph may help. We referred to our field guide for shape and markings—for those bits of nature we couldn't bring inside and set before us on the kitchen table.

Just as Edith Holden chose poems and mottos to adorn her Nature Diary, Charlotte Mason suggested that children pick poems to adorn their Journal. Nature in verse is quite easy to find in a poetry anthology. We used ***Favorite Poems Old and New*** selected by Helen Ferris. A couple lines of verse (an excerpt of any length poem) are fine for young students. All three verses of "Queen Anne's Lace" by Mary Leslie Newton were copied into one of my student's journals when she was in second grade—one verse a day. An empty lot in our neighborhood was covered with this pretty weed— *Daucus carota*—related to the carrots we eat.

### **Fitting in Formal Lessons**

In the 1990s I kept a copy of the teacher's guide, ***Handbook of Nature Study*** by Anna Comstock, open on my lap. When the children were drawing, I'd ask a few observation questions or read portions of the book aloud for a "lesson." This was the occasional way I'd round out our study—a way the character, Carol, in my story ***Pocketful of Pinecones*** uses the guide with her children. Picture books from the local library enabled my children to read for themselves about subjects in nature, especially those things outside our habitat.

### **Approaching Nature With Reverence**

Have you noticed how often the verses of the great hymns speak of God revealing Himself (though imperfectly) through His creation—what theologians call general revelation? While reading an article by Mr. G. Downton from a ***Parents' Review*** magazine, I highlighted his words:

"Nature study should be approached with *reverence*. For the natural world is the expression of God's personality in a form that is within reach of all of us to comprehend in some measure."

### **Uncovering a Verse of Nature in a Hymn**

"All Things Bright and Beautiful"  
"Fairest Lord Jesus"  
"For the Beauty of the Earth"  
"His Eye Is on the Sparrow"  
"In the Garden"  
"Morning Has Broken"  
"This Is My Father's World"

Once Nature Study has made its appeal and you awaken to its offerings, you may decide that one day a week isn't time enough to observe and appreciate. The spring season, for instance, brings forth so many living things out of hiding at once. Attempt *formally* only what feels doable. *Informally*, nature attracts the curiosity of children. This "wise letting alone" is school of a kind too. Just remember to look up at the stars.

*Home educators know Karen Andreola by her groundbreaking book **A Charlotte Mason Companion**. Karen taught her three children through high school--studying with them all the many wonderful things her own education was missing. The entire Andreola family writes product reviews for [Rainbow Resource Center](#). Knitting mittens and sweaters and cross-stitching historic samplers are activities enjoyed in*

*Karen's leisure. For encouraging ideas, visit her blog:*  
[www.momentswithmotherculture.blogspot.com](http://www.momentswithmotherculture.blogspot.com).

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