

Keeping track—notes on keeping an illustrated journal

by Lyn Baldwin

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When we first walked through the meadow last summer, I hardly noticed the tall stalks of *Frasera speciosa*, commonly known as green gentian or monument plant. But when Marc and the dogs descended down towards Ford Creek leaving me to ramble through the meadow with my field journal open, the uniqueness of the green gentian plants became abundantly clear. Each plant bore greenish-yellow, open flowers distributed along its main stalk. In this meadow of flowers dominated by the bright colors of lupine, flax, delpinium, and potentilla, the green-colored flowers were unusual enough, but I was particularly intrigued by the small furry ridges that bisected each petal and by the long silky hairs that swathed the base of petals. I immediately tried to imagine what pollinator would be attracted to these flowers. Questions surrounded my quick sketch of the flowers.

Later, when I researched the pollination biology of green gentian, I found the story was even odder than I had imagined. Green gentian is visited by a wide variety of potential pollinators, including social and solitary bees, wasps, sawflies, hoverflies, moths, butterflies and several species of beetles, which come to either collect pollen grains or drink nectar from the furry ridges (actually nectar-producing canals). Furthermore, demographic studies in Colorado have shown that this long-lived perennial tends to flower synchronously on a four-year cycle. Thousands of plants will bloom one summer and then very few for the next three summers. This floral synchrony is viewed as a strategy for predator avoidance. By flowering so abundantly, green gentian ensures that when it does flower there will be more flowers than predators, and by only flowering intermittently, green gentian does not provide a continual resource for predator populations. Without

my field journal as a prompt to explore the contours of gentian flowers, I might never have stopped long enough to ask questions about this curious plant.

For the last five years, my field journals have been wandering further and further afield from the rigid outlines of field notes that I learned to keep in graduate school. My journals are big—handbound of luscious blank paper that is smooth enough for a pen to skim across and sturdy enough to accept watercolors. The writing isn't always in straight lines and sometimes the illustrations may not make much sense to anyone but me, but nearly every page in my journals represents a series of lessons that I learned in the field. The decision to include drawings in my field journal has been a pivotal step in my development as a naturalist. While I risked the terror of learning to draw I also gained the deep pleasure of increasing my observation skills. The attempt to trace the contours of petals and stamens taught me that although I knew the names of flowers, I often didn't know much more about them. In her book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, Betty Edwards explains that drawing utilizes a completely different part of our brain than writing. By doing both, we gain a much more holistic understanding of whatever it is we are trying to record. I also learned that this deeper understanding is not dependent upon already being a fine artist. The first drawings in my journals are rudimentary—stick drawings of plants showing branching patterns and simple shapes of leaves. Even making these simple diagrams forced me to slow down and truly observe what I was attempting to draw.

Field sketching has been a tool long used by naturalists. In Montana, perhaps the most famous illustrated field journals are those by Lewis and Clark. During the Corps of Discovery's expedition, both Meriwether Lewis and William Clark peppered their journals with illustrations. Many of their illustrations stand alone, others are folded into the text of their journals, with the outlines of sword fern and vine maple leaves being surrounded by their written words. Field sketching is a tool for anyone who wishes to learn from nature. Today, books like *A Trail*

through Leaves by Hannah Hinchman and *Nature Drawing* by Claire Walker Leslie continue to provide inspiration and advice for those wishing to start their own illustrated journal.

Once the "fear of the white page" is conquered, there is magic in creating an illustrated journal page. Although many of my journal pages read left to right, the handwriting itself can create visual spaces and tone on the page by changes in orientation or style. Crinkly leaves seem to call out for spidery text, elongated letters make good companions for the elegant spires of glaciated mountains. Likewise the density of images or of line can vary from one page to the next. I am drawn to keep an illustrated journal through my love of the natural world, but over the last five years, I have become addicted to the sense of play that comes when I'm reaching for a new way to illustrate a particular moment. Most importantly, however, the juxtaposition of words and images in my journal allows me to see, to truly observe, the startling minutiae of moments that might have gone unnoticed. Although my completed journals sit in a line on my bookshelf, it is the process that they represent that has made my life so much richer in texture.