Florida Grasshopper Sparrow
Ammmodramus savannarum floridanus

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A Backyard Big Year
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Advanced Bird ID around Home

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Katie Fallon is the author of the nonfiction books *Vulture* and *Cerulean Blues*, as well as two books for children. She is a founder of the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia and manages the West Virginia Young Birders Club. Katie’s first word was “bird.”

Bridget Butler, aka The Bird Diva, lives in northwestern Vermont and is known for her legendary Barred Owl call. She specializes in what she calls Slow Birding—reimagining how we connect with birds through our sense of place. Bridget has worked for Audubon in Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Maine.

Ken Warren is Public Affairs Officer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service–Florida Ecological Services Offices. He previously served with the U.S. Air Force in active duty, reserve, and civilian capacities. Ken is a native of Ft. Worth, Texas, and is a graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington.

Peter G. Kaestner is a retired U.S. diplomat and world lister. He was the first person to see all the world’s bird families, and he discovered a new bird, the Cundinamarca Antpitta, *Grallaria kaestneri*. When not adding to his life list, Peter is a part-time tour leader for Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Adventures.
A Birder's Brain on Paper

How keeping a nature journal improves our birding experiences

Spark Chicken
My first bird love was the Red Junglefowl, domestic type. Although my official “spark bird” is the Northern Pygmy-owl, it really all goes back to chickens. I got day-old chicks when I was six years old, and I fell in love with these little feathered friends. For the first five months of their lives, I raised them by hand and held them every day. I named them all, observed their unique personalities, and loved them very much.

After carefully observing my chickens, I began to pay more attention to the other birds in my yard. I learned that what I had been calling Blue Jays were actually California Scrub-Jays. Little did I know, this misidentification would become one of my biggest pet peeves in my future as a birder! I found an old field guide in our family book collection (the 1990 Peterson), and I studied the birds in my yard—Plain Titmouse (now Oak Titmouse), Lesser Goldfinch, Rufous-sided Towhee (now Spotted Towhee), House Finch, Mourning Dove, Acorn Woodpecker, and others.

I have been seriously in love with birds since age 10, and I am now nearly 17. I am not necessarily what you might call your “typical teenager.” I do not watch TV and I rarely use a computer. I just recently got a cell phone, much to my chagrin, and I only use it to text my parents if I am out of town at bird camps. Otherwise, I leave it at home. I have no social media accounts, and I don’t want any. Instead of getting lost in the overwhelming world of social media, I prefer to get lost in the overwhelmingly amazing world of birds.

One of my great loves besides birding is art. I have loved drawing ever since I could hold a pencil. I also really love nature, and it has always been a big part of my life. Since I was three years old, I have attended Waldorf schools, where art and nature are an integral part of the curriculum. My family is blessed to live near a river, with hundreds of miles of open space and wild trails right out our back door. I feel so lucky to be surrounded by nature, and I felt welcomed into it from a very early age.

In her frequent encounters with common species like the Red-tailed Hawk, the author delights in documenting variation among individual birds. From the nature journals of Fiona Clare Gillogly.

When I was 13, I had the good fortune of a chance meeting with artist, naturalist, author, and educator John Muir (“Jack”) Laws, and that moment changed my life. Through Jack, I learned about nature journaling, which is this amazing combination of two things I love that go great together: art and nature. Jack and I became friends and sketching buddies, and we have had lots of fun nature experiences together. He is childlike, in a good way, so it is super-fun to explore with him, Jack gets excited about everything, and, with his contagious joy, he helps those around him get excited, too. Jack has also taught me about the power of practice, or what he calls “pencil miles.” In other words, the only way to get better at drawing is to draw. I have seen the power of practice in my own art, and it inspires me to work harder to keep improving.

Birds and Art
One of my favorite ways to study birds is to draw them. When I am observing and drawing a bird, I find that I pay closer attention and notice more, I get more curious about the bird I am observing, and I build stronger memories of the experience when I draw and journal about it. Plus, being in a sketching mindset helps me find novelty in the familiar and helps make birding more fun and playful.

Is Drawing a “Gift”? You might be thinking, “Journaling sounds fun, but I can’t draw.” Many people think drawing is a gift and you are either born with it or not. But the truth is that you can learn how to draw, and you can improve through practice. I know this because I have seen my drawings improve over time. It is all about those pencil miles. The more you draw, the better your drawings will be. In this regard, I have been

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influenced by Carol Dweck, who proposed the idea of a “growth mindset,” meaning the belief that intelligence and skills can be developed. It applies to all parts of your life, not just drawing. If you don’t focus on trying to make perfect drawings and just draw a lot, you will get better. Another interesting story comes from David Bayles and Ted Orland’s book Art & Fear, in which a ceramics teacher offers two options for a grade in the class; one grade is based on the total weight of the work a student created, the other on the quality of the student’s work. It turned out, as the authors describe, “The works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity.”

Nature journaling is not about making a pretty picture. As Jack has said, nature journaling is a way to “get your brain on paper,” and it improves your attention, observation, and curiosity through repeated practice. As artist and field guide author David Allen Sibley has written, “The simple act of trying to draw something can change the way you look at the world…Drawing birds is about so much more than drawing birds.”

Another important part of journaling for me is that my journal is only for me. Because I don’t feel pressured to impress anyone with my drawings or paintings in my journal, I don’t have to worry about making pretty pictures; instead I focus on observations and questions.

Why Not Just Take a Photo?
Photographs are a valuable document of birding experiences, and I am not suggesting that you trade in your camera for a journal. You can do both—they are fundamentally different. I have used others’ photos as a reference for a sketch, but I love how sketching helps me study the bird more closely and sparks my curiosity. I have noticed that birds in photographs do hold still for longer than those in the wild, so it is easier to sketch from bird photos!

I next look at some of the ways journaling has improved my birding experience.

Journaling Helps Me Notice Novelty in the Familiar • Everyone loves to see new things. Our brains are programmed to respond to novelty. Seeing new habitat and new birds is exhilarating. Often, the familiar birds of our backyards get dubbed “trash birds” because of how common they are. But when I am field sketching, no bird is a trash bird. Birding, for me, has become a game of finding the new in the ordinary, and when I am operating in the nature journaling mindset, I can always find novelty. In my years as a birder, I have seen many Red-tailed Hawks, but they never cease to amaze me because of their variations. Of course, I love seeing the rarer Ferruginous

In this entry, devoted chiefly to the Sandhill Crane, note that at least half the comments are in the form of a question. Nature journaling prompts us to ask questions and seek answers we might not otherwise. From the nature journals of Fiona Clare Gillogly.
Hawk. But paying close attention to a common bird can really pay off.

Recently, I was walking on the trails near my house and I heard a little call note of a woodpecker. I looked up and it flew across my path. It had a big white oval on its back, so my first thought was Downy Woodpecker, a bird I hear and see fairly often in my area. I could have dismissed it as a Downy and gone on my way, but I wanted to sketch it, so I looked more closely. I saw that the bill was relatively thick and long, and when I listened carefully to the call again, I realized it was more harsh than the Downy calls I was used to. I had found a Hairy Woodpecker. This was the first time I had seen one on these trails. I sketched the cooperative bird for quite some time. If I hadn’t stopped to look more closely and sketch this bird, I might have missed the identification. Sketching has trained me to look and look again.

**Journaling Helps Me Notice More Detail**

Thinking about how I would paint birds helps me to see the differences between them. I remember a time when I was looking closely at two species of birds at my feeder, a Pine Siskin and a Lesser Goldfinch. I noticed that the two colors of yellow were different: The yellow of the siskin wing was more of a pineapple color, whereas the goldfinch was more of a buttercup yellow. I knew that to paint these birds with watercolor, I would use a combination of Permanent White Gouache and Hansa Yellow Light to illustrate the Pine Siskin, but Hansa Yellow Light with a little bit of Permanent Orange to paint the Lesser Goldfinch. Being able to see the difference in these subtle colors can be really useful in identifying birds—and thinking of birds from an artistic point of view can improve your birding skills.

At the 2019 Central Valley Birding Symposium, bird artist Keith Hansen was on a panel with other expert birders who were challenged with photos of birds that were difficult to identify. One photo stumping the group was a juvenile accipiter of some sort. Keith said that one way he likes to spot the difference between a juvenile Cooper’s Hawk and juvenile Sharp-Shinned Hawk is to think about how he would paint each bird: He would paint the Sharpie on wet canvas and the Cooper’s on dry canvas. Once I saw them from this artistic perspective, it was easier to tell the birds apart.

**Journaling Makes Birding Even More Fun**

When I sketch, I have more fun than if I’m just birding. Since I’m paying attention to each bird and discovering new and interesting things about it, I’m never bored. Research shows that when our brains are at play, we learn more. Because I’m having fun noticing the nuanced differences between birds as I draw them, I’m learning more about them. Each bird is different, so the discoveries are endless. On my nature journaling walks, I often don’t get far because the longer I stay in one spot, the more interesting the birds become. Sometimes I get only a few hundred yards down the trail and then sit there for an hour watching a pair of Violet-green Swallows preparing their nest or feeding babies. For me, this is a far more satisfactory walk than if I had gone five miles and stopped only briefly to look at the Violet-greens. What I have found is that the slower you go and the closer you look, the more incredible the ordinary becomes.
Journaling Helps Me Get “My Brain on Paper” • Since I began journaling, I have come up with lots of observations and questions whenever I watch birds. In psychology, the term “cognitive load” refers to the amount of working memory you are currently using. When I journal, I reduce my cognitive load by writing down my observations and questions. This frees up my brain for more thoughts and observations, and allows me to muse about connections among my thoughts that are now on paper; this is the concept of “meta-cognition,” or thinking about what you are thinking about. Research shows that I will likely forget my observations and questions if I don’t write them down. By sketching and taking careful notes, I am training myself to be a better observer and documenter.

A while back, my mom and I took our dog on a walk on the trails near our house, and we noticed some Cedar Waxwings eating berries. We chatted about them and I had a few questions, but I didn’t have my journal with me. By the time we got home from our 45-minute hike, I had forgotten what I had been curious about. This was a good reminder to me to bring my journal kit on every hike, so I can write those things down, make connections between my thoughts, come up with more interesting questions, and remember what I was thinking about.

Journaling Builds on Past Experience • Journaling has a cumulative effect—my learning builds from observation to observation. The next time I sketch a White-crowned Sparrow, for instance, I may note different things and ask questions about these differences. I can also remember previous individual birds I have sketched and compare this new one to those I have sketched before. For instance, while I was banding birds, I noticed some thin, hair-like feathers on the back of some birds’ heads. I was curious about what they were for, and I made a note to look at certain things next time I went out banding. I took notes on what species possessed these feathers and how many there were. I’m still working on this mystery, and every time I go bird banding now, I’m looking for more clues as to what

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TOP: Take a closer look at this Say’s Phoebe account, and you’ll see a lot of cool insights. As you take the plunge into journaling, go beyond just drawing a picture of the bird; include questions, conjectures, notes on habitat, observations of feeding, and the other birds you see and hear in the area. From the nature journals of Fiona Clare Gillogly.

BOTTOM: Apr. 6, 2020, cloudy and cold, was a ”crazy bird day” for the author. Note how she annotates her bird list with colors to indicate the “usual suspects” or something unexpected. Journaling aids tremendously in remembering and other cognitive abilities. From the nature journals of Fiona Clare Gillogly.
they might be. This helps me contemplate the mystery and work on understanding it more over time.

**Journaling Builds Stronger Memories** •
When I flip through past field journals, I can remember exactly where I was and what the weather was like and what birds were singing, even if I drew only one bird on that page. Attending to the moment by sketching that bird helps me remember the other details from that moment.

I have been lucky to travel with my family and other groups. The trips I remember best are those on which I kept a journal. Even if I can’t remember the trip off the top of my head, I can go back to those journals and all the memories come rushing back. About a year ago, I went river rafting in Utah with my class from school. Recently, I was thinking about the trip and how fun it was, so I went back and reread the journal I kept. Many times, I found myself saying, “Oh, yeah! I forgot about that!” This is one reason I have a rule that whenever I see a bird for the first time, I have to sketch it to count it on my life list. This is not only a huge challenge, but it is also very fun and so worth it. Sketching the new bird makes it impossible to just look at it for five seconds, count it on my life list, and move on without giving it further thought. The act of sketching that bird helps me permanently keep it in my memory.

**Journaling Makes Me Curious** •
When I am field sketching, I slow down enough to wonder, to realize all the things I don’t know, and this ignites my curiosity. Research shows that when we are curious, our minds are primed to learn and remember more. This is one of the great joys of nature journaling for me. I love to ask questions in my journal, and the more detail I see and document, the more questions I have. Another keen insight from David Sibley: “When I am drawing, I look more closely and ask and answer questions that I would not have considered if I was just watching.”

Questions are intrinsically good because
they pull me into a state of heightened awareness and focus. Research shows that curiosity is one of the precursors of moving into a “flow state,” what many people call their “happy place,” where you get so engrossed in what you are doing that you lose track of time. This flow state triggers a mix of potent neurotransmitters in my brain, while reducing blood flow to the part of my brain that houses my inner critic, helping to mute it. Curiosity is a dopamine-mediated response. My brain gets a squirt of dopamine when I get curious, so curiosity literally feels good.

Asking questions is fun. Answers are important, too, of course, but I am not concerned with answering every question I ask. Because I do not focus on the answers at the moment, asking questions is very freeing. If I had to answer all the questions I ask in my journal, it would paralyze me. The act of asking questions helps me go deeper into the mystery. I start with basic questions, and then those questions lead to more interesting questions. The best questions often come after many simple ones. This is what I call a question chain—a series of questions, starting with simple ones and getting more complex, each new question building on the last. Without even being answered, these questions will take me into a thought process and investigation I would not reach otherwise. If I do decide to go look something up, I don’t just stop when I get the answer to the question. Instead, I let it spark another question.

Sadly, it seems that many people in our society are afraid of questions. When we were small children, we asked lots of questions. But at some point, we stopped. A lot of people, teenagers and adults alike, are afraid to ask questions. Why? We don’t want to look stupid and we don’t want anyone to know that we don’t know all the answers. I have found that building the skill of curiosity in the safety of my own nature journal has given me the chance to practice asking lots of questions—and the courage to do it more and more. Getting curious in my nature journal has enabled and empowered me to look beyond my journal and question everything around me.

I think, now, at this moment in our world’s history, asking questions is vital to our survival. If we continue to fear questions, we will miss the opportunity to solve difficult problems and make the world a better place. One of the best questions I ever heard came from a Mary Oliver poem, “The Summer Day”: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” I now know my answer: I want to spend my life observing, wondering about, and standing in awe of nature and all it has to offer. But awe is only the beginning: I want to spend my life taking care of nature and fighting to protect it. In order to do this, I will carefully observe the natural world, writing and drawing a lot in my journal, and asking lots of questions.

Find a Mystery to Explore
Nature journaling is an integral part of my birding practice. The act of slowing down, observing, and recording my thoughts and making sketches in my journal makes birding more fun and interesting, and I learn more through this process. I believe that nature journaling has made me a better birder and made birding more fun for me.

I hope you can go outside, take a sketchbook, and find a bird with a mystery to explore. Remember, it is not about making pretty pictures—it is about making interesting observations and lasting memories of your birding experiences. I promise you: The more you sketch, the better you will get at it. You will enjoy what David Sibley refers to as “the deeper and longer-lasting rewards of drawing—the knowledge and understanding that come from the process.”

For Further Study
The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling by John Muir Laws (Heyday, 2016)
Free instructional video tutorials on drawing and nature journaling: johnmuirlaws.com/blog
Art & Fear by David Bayles and Ted Orland (Image Continuum Press, 2001)