

*Reading Nature: Keeping a Nature Journal* by Clare Walker Leslie and Charles E. Roth (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. N. Adams, MA: Storey, 2003)

Review by Tom Murphy, Mansfield University, Mansfield, PA

Yesterday, since I planned to write about my walk, I grabbed a small pocket notebook and a pencil on my way out the door. At the edge of the woods, I stopped to look at a four-foot long, broken-off branch suspended upside down in a curtain of leafless grape vines. I had seen it before, but I saw now the branch had broken off from a larger branch twenty feet up and the vine was hanging from the stub. The branch had not fallen into the vine; it had fallen off with it.

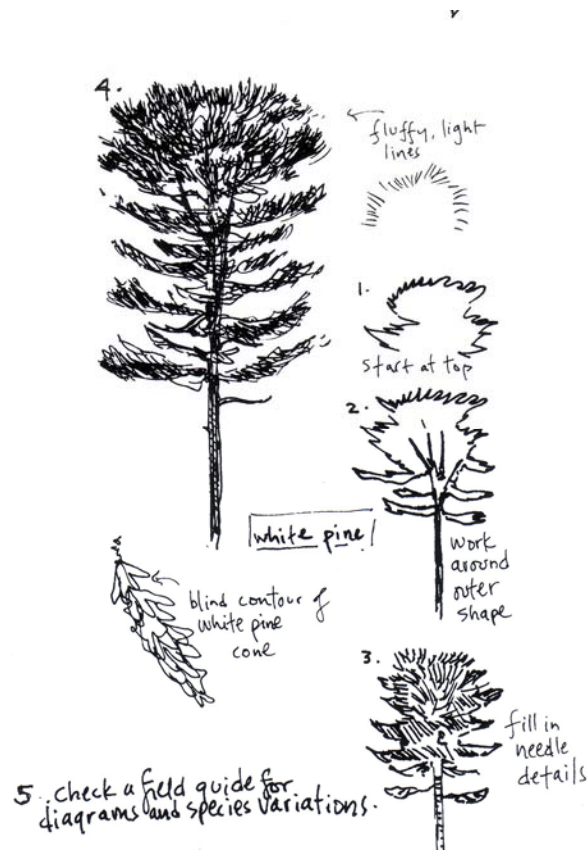
I made a quick sketch of the branch, just to remind myself of its shape, and jotted "White Pine branch in grape vine."

Later, at my desk, I described what I had seen and concluded, "The vine that once hung from the branch is now what the branch hangs from."

This small insight is a souvenir I would not have had if I had not been looking for it. And I would not have been looking for it if I were not going to journal about it.

And that is an important part of the message of Clare Leslie and Chuck Roth's book *Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You...* The claim in the subtitle is a grand one but squares with my experience. The book is a heavily illustrated, over-sized paperback and given the number and quality of the color illustrations, the list price (\$18.95) is remarkable.

The first part, "Getting Started," suggests reasons to journal and possible formats with many examples, from recording everyday events in the backyard to extraordinary experiences in faraway places. For Leslie and Roth, a journal mixes writing and drawing, and the proportion depends on what appeals to you. They emphasize drawing because "drawing and observing are mutually reinforcing activities," and the book contains exercises and tips about how to draw plants, animals, and whole landscapes. The goal of the drawing is not great art but better experiences with nature (lucky for me), and even crude writings and drawings may produce better experiences than photographs, which sometimes become substitutes for looking closely.



The second part of the book suggests by season what to look for and how to record it. The book is full of examples, and it is hard not to get caught up in its enthusiasm. Even in the dead of winter, there are the signs of animals that stay active—squirrels, foxes, deer, and even houseflies—and the buds on the bare trees. But spring is a great time to start, since rejuvenation begins slowly and you can build up skill gradually.

As the authors note, “Journaling challenges you in the most positive way, by opening up opportunities for you to explore your own creativity and express your own observations and experiences of the world more fully.” And beyond the present benefit, in a nature journal we record the events that spark our feelings so that later, when we look back at the journal, we can relive them and share them.