

Carson Molleur, a fifth-grader from Woodbury, made this pencil drawing of geese on ice.

## Natural history

### Journals help to record outdoor experience for posterity

By SUSAN SAWYER

**T**he Canada geese have now headed south for the winter, but some of their antics have been captured in the nature journals of Woodbury School's fifth- and sixth-grade students.

When the nearby beaver pond began to thaw last March, nine geese arrived — the perfect opportunity for teacher Elizabeth Titus to engage her class in drawing and writing outdoors as part of the science curriculum.

The challenge was to get close enough to observe the birds without disturbing them.

The students were pretty confident that they could sneak up on the geese. They snaked their way single-file along the edge of the pond and then through the woods, over an old stone wall and out to a sunny, grassy bank — less than 30 feet from the geese.

The big birds were startled but soon settled down, as the children slowly found spots to sit and watch. They observed the big birds swimming and grazing, and giggled to see them tipping up with only their tail-ends in the air. They heard the geese splashing and honking, and watched closely as the birds hopped out on the ice — preening and napping on one foot, heads tucked under wings.

As all the creatures settled into their places, the students opened their nature journals and sketched the geese and the late winter scene.

Drawing and writing in nature provide a time-honored technique for getting in closer touch with the outside world. Sometimes a journal page is filled with quick sketches capturing a movement or gesture; or it may be simply a list of words or a series of observations and questions. Whatever the subject, the journal becomes a rich record of places, times and experiences.

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Similar to playing a musical instrument or a sport, drawing is a skill to be developed. It's not magic, and getting better at it is far more about time than talent.

During preschool and early grades, children often record their observations in pictures. As their literacy grows, the time spent drawing is often replaced by writing. Often by the time we become adults, we prefer to write rather than draw.

But many artists and science educators are helping students continue to use observational drawings, along with writing, to enrich and deepen their understanding of the visual world.

Jenny Hewitt, a teacher at Pomfret Elementary School, has her third and fourth-grade students learn about water quality by searching for, identifying and counting the small invertebrates that live in a brook near the school. First the children draw a variety of creatures from preserved specimens — stoneflies, mayflies, caddisflies and more. Then, equipped with this experience, they visit the stream. As they turn over rocks and find living examples, they can recognize many of them already.

Two years ago, Karen Liebermann and other Four Winds Nature Program volunteers at East Montpelier Elementary School decided that their fifth- and sixth-grade students could benefit from more time outdoors and an interdisciplinary approach to science and the natural world.

With the cooperation of school staff and administration, the volunteers and teacher Ellen Knoedler get the children out at least once a month to explore, sit, watch — and write and draw about what they see. Each child has a sketchbook and a Zip-Lock bag of tools: mechanical pencil, felt-tipped pen, colored pencils, small ruler and a hand lens.

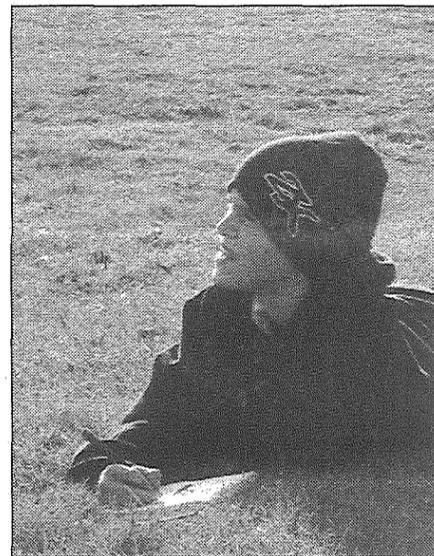
Liebermann reports that the students have learned to see the nearby woods in a whole new way, with keener awareness. Returning to the classroom from a recent session, one student remarked, "I really want to go back to that tree."

The process must allow for different learning styles. Some students are happy to sit down under a tree and draw until dark; others are not still for a moment unless someone insists. The contemplative ones observe deeply and may hear or see things no one else notices.

Meanwhile, the scouts range all over the place — they are the trackers, the stone-turners and the hole-investigators. The students who can't sit still or keep quiet are likely to be the ones who find the fish eggs at the edge of the pond, and excited to show them to everyone.

A scout might not want to spend a long time writing or drawing, but, as the journals of Lewis and Clark clearly show, any explorer benefits from keeping good notes.

Keeping a nature journal is a simple, informal activity that families and individuals of all ages can enjoy. Some people make a small journal just for



KAREN LIEBERMANN PHOTO

**Erik Dorfman of East Montpelier draws a tree on a sunny day in November.**

each vacation trip. Others, like artist and naturalist Nona Estrin of East Montpelier, use a small watercolor kit to add beautiful color to quick ink sketches.

A journal can become a place for poems, snapshots, maps, postcards, tide tables and weather forecasts, as well as drawings and prose. Whatever a person chooses to put in it, the nature journal is a valuable and deeply personal tool for seeing, learning and remembering.

The beginning of January is the perfect time to open up a blank book and begin to record the New Year in pictures and words. Soon enough the geese will be back.

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