

Nature Journaling in the Berg

Against the wild splendour of the Amphitheatre, this journaling course hones skills that will stand gardeners, landscaper, and budding artists in good stead.

Gardeners are busy people. Like worker ants, they move about their territory cleaning, collecting, cutting, planting; there is always something to do in our tamed outdoors. Despite this, I confess to spending countless unproductive hours outside, meandering slowly but with investigative intent between pond, flower beds, and the unholy mess that is the bottom of the garden. Imagine my delight then, discovering that this activity is just what is needed to help fill the pages of a nature journal. Far from being lazy, I am, in fact, practicing one of the most important skills needed by scientists and gardeners alike - observation. We're not talking about looking skywards and remarking, 'Looks like rain'; nor making a mental note that the Plecs are in need of pruning. This is time spent outdoors with the express purpose of observing and recording using sketches and words to capture just a moment of nature's life that surrounds and supports you – Nature Journaling. It is the act of removing yourself from the demands of this human-centric, stress-filled world, not to scurry around with busy hands and head, but to become the silent watcher.

This is not a new, creative pastime; plant hunters and natural scientists from centuries past sketched, labelled, and described plants, their growing environment, and associated animal interactions; these notebooks have formed the basis of much of our current knowledge in all fields of science.

“Creating a natural history sketchbook: Experience the wildlife, wildflowers and scenery of the Drakensberg at The Cavern, by sketching and painting in the field and in the studio, with Gill Condry and Elsa Pooley”, read the invitation to attend this 5-day course. Eyes glossing over the words 'sketching and painting', alighting instead on 'wildflowers', 'Drakensberg' and 'Elsa Pooley', I accepted with alacrity, for what lover of local flora would turn down an invitation to wander with Elsa through her backyard? I found myself in early March receiving a sun-drenched welcome on the lawns of The Cavern Drakensburg Resort, along with photojournalist, amateur conservationist, and friend, Andrea Abbott. Newly purchased art materials were tucked out of sight for we had no intention of trying them out; photographs, we had agreed on the trip up, were our form of artistic expression, and besides that, they were necessary for our work. Case closed.

Gill and Elsa though, were up to the challenge of defiant, unruly students; pencils sharpened with a scalpel (we all had a go at this, reminding me of school days spent in line at the old windmill style pencil sharpener firmly attached to the teacher's desk!) we found ourselves practicing line drawing, hatching, and cross-hatching - 'All good drawings are built up using

basic marks', Gill's notes inform. While there is more emphasis on sketching in this course, with a portion of the day spent learning basic techniques either in studio or in situ - our first outdoor studio was in dappled light alongside the forest stream - nature lovers get the balance of the day to be guided by Elsa through the natural grasslands and forests on this Site of Conservation Significance – and she knows just where the special flowers lurk.

The Cavern Resort has exceptional bragging rights: It sits adjacent to the Royal Natal National Park and the Amphitheatre; an area proclaimed a World Heritage Site in 2002. Its rich biological diversity, a plethora of endemic and endangered species, natural beauty, and cultural properties (Bushman rock paintings), allowing it to stand on the world stage alongside only 21 other world sites. In July 2006, The Cavern itself was awarded the status of Site of Conservation Significance, a title given only to sites that contribute significantly to nature conservation, qualifying by virtue of the landscape - Cave Sandstone cliffs, the natural communities - the Fern Forest, Protea Woodland, and grasslands - and the number of rare and endemic species of fauna and flora. A walk along the circular Fern Forest Trail brings you to a venerable, 200-year-old Cape Ash, and the biggest cabbage tree in the Berg, (probably in all of Africa, suggests a David Johnson, host of many of the bird courses held here, in one of his blog entries). At 150 years old it reaches sturdy, somewhat knobbly, and twisted branches towards a break in the forest canopy. The area is a birders and wildflower fundi's heaven; there are 213 bird species, 73 tree species, of which 35 are endemic to SA, according to David's blog, and endemic and rare alpine wildflowers. The iconic Protea family is represented in the Protea woodland on the hills behind the hotel, the only habitat that supports the endemic Gurney's Sugarbird. *P. roupelliae* and *P. repens* were in flower during our visit, the black bark of these gnarled trees easily viewed against the diffused greens of the mountain backdrop.

So, what do you include in your nature journal? Whatever you wish to, whatever has meaning for you - there are no hard and fast rules. Each entry can be as small as the sketch of a leaf or as large as a landscape. A single page can hold cameos of your hour, day, week, or month, or a full-day trip to your local reserve. Perhaps the first place to begin is at home; fill your gardening scrapbook with magazine cut-outs of what you'd like in your garden and fill your nature journal with what is already there!

It is our final day; up until now, work has been with pencil alone - time to break out the paint. We find the French absent from our tube of Ultramarine; Permanent Rose is missing too. I wonder if they will notice an Absconding Anno. Perhaps I could escape behind Gill as she ventures upstairs to watch yet another Protea wicket go down. Surprisingly, we find mixing paints to create a colour chart of the subject, great fun, and hard work - initially frustrating as you realise that the slightest brush-tip of water or paint changes a colour dramatically. It's all about the lightest touch, Gill encourages. Luckily, teachers and fellow students share colours – and putty rubber - generously. As much as I have enjoyed dabbling, even being rather satisfied with my pencil sketch of *Cotyledon orbiculata*, and the tracing paper overlay that

adds texture and shading to the subject, I know the less accurate journal sketching is more suited to my skill level - and I can always claim artistic license.

Elsa and Gill give you the confidence to put pencil to paper, certainly enough to stir up sufficient enthusiasm to persevere once home.

This course is not only for artists, for there are practical advantages for the indigenous gardener and landscaper, amateur naturalist, or any lover of the outdoors, as observation and focusing skills, useful in so many areas of life, are honed. In fact, many students from schools around the world attend Nature Journaling courses in the USA and Europe, as education specialists understand how it helps to reinforce not only the scientific skills of observation and documentation but creative language and vocabulary too. In an era of virtual connections, this time outdoors reduces stress, calms the mind, and helps children re-connect with the natural world.

I have seldom enjoyed a course as much. Whether or not art is your 'thing', if you have an interest in nature, I strongly recommend this Nature Journaling course with Gill and Elsa. From the camaraderie and sheer fun of studio work, the restful creativity of outdoor studies, to the daily walks through a stunning landscape beneath a vast African sky, it was an exhilarating 5 days that stretched our skills and tested our resolve and willingness to persevere with a new hobby. And filled the creative bucket to spilling point.

Like any worthwhile pursuit learning the basics from a top-class teacher will encourage you to keep it up, and the credentials and achievements of course leaders, Gil Condy and Elsa Pooley require an entirely separate article to do them justice.

<http://www.cavern.co.za/botanical-art-courses/>. This shortened version references this website.

Elsa Pooley is a self-taught botanical artist, amateur botanist, and indigenous landscaper. She received an honorary Doctor of Science award from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and several medals and awards from various organisations like the Wildlife and Environment Society (Natal Branch), Association of Botanists, The Botanical Society of Southern Africa, the Durban Botanic Gardens Trust, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, and the South African Landscapers Institute. Having illustrated a number of books, Elsa is also a well-known author, her most famous work probably '*The Complete Field Guide to Trees of Natal, Zululand & Transkei*' (1993), '*A Field Guide to the Wildflowers of KwaZulu-Natal & the Eastern Region*' (1998), '*Mountain Flowers. A Field Guide to the Flora of the Drakensberg and Lesotho*' (2003), and '*Forest Plants, in the forest and in the garden*'. She is currently working on an indigenous garden plant book with Geoff Nichols and Andrew Hankey, hopefully out within the next year.

Gill Condy has a Masters's in scientific illustration from the Middlesex Polytechnic in London and is currently the resident botanical artist at SANBI in Pretoria. She has received numerous medals at art exhibitions worldwide; has a painting featured in the prestigious Highgrove Florilegium vol. 1, commissioned by His Royal Highness, Prince Charles; has presented a painting of “Mandela’s Gold” to President Nelson Mandela; illustrated over 320 plates for numerous books, and has a new cliff-dwelling grass Aloe named for her – *Aloe condyae*!

To read their more complete biographies written by The Cavern owner Megan Carte Beddingham, please click here. Kloof Conservancy recently published an interview with Elsa’s life in their latest Leopard’s Echo publication. It offers a mere glimpse into her extraordinarily busy life and is worth a read. <http://le.kloofconservancy.org.za/the-reluctant-revolutionary-elsa-pooley/>