

Natural History Assignments (30%, or 10% each)

1300-1500 words, typed, single spaced, submitted as Word document to Blackboard

What is natural history?

*One ecologist, Tom Fleischner, has defined **natural history** as “a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy.” Unlike modern scientific disciplines like biology, of which natural history was a precursor, natural history emphasizes observation over experimentation. For this reason, it has historically been regarded more as an “amateur” rather than professional pursuit, because it does not require specialized instruments or knowledge. Where professional scientists tend to be “specialists,” naturalists or natural historians tend to be “generalists.” However, in recent years, even professional scientists have expressed concern that the skills of natural history (close attention to the natural world) have been in decline in the sciences. They worry that the loss of these basic skills are adversely affecting more specialized scientific disciplines (especially ecology) and are calling on universities to re-evaluate and revise their curricula to include more natural history.*

Also unlike modern science, natural history has often explicitly invoked the relationship between its study (of organisms) and human culture, art, and politics. Some famous naturalists include those on our course syllabus, like Humboldt, Thoreau, and Muir, as well as Charles Darwin, John James Audubon, Annie Alexander, E. O. Wilson, and Rachel Carson.

What Is the Natural History Assignment?

Based on your natural history journal, develop your experiences and observations into a work of natural history. Your **natural history assignment** is different from your field notes or journal. It will be an *interpretation or translation* of your journal, not merely a *transcription* of it. You should aim to select important features of your field observations to develop and elaborate into an essay or some other written product.

This work should have a point (e.g., a theme, an idea, an argument). I expect your natural history to extend/elaborate/illustrate/complicate, rather than simply rehearse, the observations and descriptions contained in your journal. However, your journal and its observations will form the backbone of your approach, and **you should seek to tie your work to specific features of the natural world that you observed and recorded.**

We (will) have read many examples of natural histories that take many forms: poetry (William Wordsworth, John Clare, Lewis MacAdams, Richard Rodriguez, Angela Peñaredondo), travel narrative (Muir), fiction (Rudolfo Anaya, Clare Vaye-Watkins), and essay (Thoreau). Each of these writers bases her or his writing on extensive field experiences; and each of their works

was written after the fact of the actual field experience. Their forms reflect intentional choices about how to represent their experiences to an audience, to achieve a certain effect. None of these examples would be considered simply “field notes.” For examples:

- Consider William Wordsworth’s “interpretation” of Dorothy’s field observations on daffodils. You could say that William took the elements most interesting to him—the most “poetic” elements of her observations—and “translated” them into poetry. In doing so, he gave Dorothy’s notes an interpretation: he chose to leave out his companions, for example, and focus on his own feelings. This choice was not accidental, and it has interesting consequences. For example, it may reveal more about the poem’s speaker, and the poet himself, than about the environment. Nevertheless, we know that his poem is based on real world details, and so could be considered a work of “natural history.”
- Consider Humboldt’s characterization of the “higher” or “general” view of nature in *Cosmos*. While his field notes were tremendously detailed, his *Views of Nature* represent a synthesis of those details to achieve a vision of nature in which all is connected. Each sentence reflects his desire to connect together various features of the natural world.
- Consider Thoreau’s essays, “Walking” and “Huckleberries,” which are rooted in much first-hand observations that Thoreau made while walking around his rural neighborhood, as we see from his journal selections. The essays press those observations into service for thinking about nature, politics, property, economics, etc.
- Consider Muir’s travel account in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, which was written more than forty years after his actual “first summer in the Sierra.” It represents a lifetime of thinking about how to turn his firsthand experience into a narrative of spiritual wonder and awe, but it still contains evidence of very detailed observations about the natural world.

Criteria for Evaluation

The Natural History Assignment is open ended and allows for a high degree of freedom and autonomy. Unlike the RR's, which require specific responses to specific questions, often in a specific format, the NHA asks that you make your own choices about how to approach your subject. I am open to many different interpretations of this assignment. Feel free to build on your strengths. Please consult with me about your assignment. I am more than happy to discuss it with you.

While open ended, your NHA must meet some criteria.

Natural history: Your work should be based on observations that you personally make in the field. It should demonstrate *"intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy"*

Translation/Interpretation: Your work should do more than transcribe and elaborate your field journal. It should develop your observations and experiences into something with a point (a theme, idea, argument, etc.).

Synthesis (Environmental Literacy): Your assignment should demonstrate a degree of *environmental literacy*, as we have been discussing that this semester. This means some demonstrated understanding and exhibition of how your work of natural history fits into the tradition of environmental writing. For this, you should draw from relevant, representative material (e.g., readings, in-class lectures). I'll be looking for the intelligent **application** and **synthesis** of this material to your own experience, as well as accurate and correct citation of this material.

Conventions of the medium: Your assignment should conform to the conventions of whatever medium or mode you select. E.g., if you're writing an essay, your essay should demonstrate argument, theme, clarity, organization, proper citation, proper paragraphing, etc. If you're writing poems, your poems should demonstrate your understanding of meter, rhyme/rhythm, line breaks, metaphor, theme, etc. If you're writing a travel narrative, your narrative should demonstrate your understanding of theme, narrative, persona, description, metaphor, etc.