

BRIGHT MEADOW BOOKS

Field Days

Wren Calloway



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FIELD DAYS.

A YOUNG NATURALIST'S ALMANAC

BY

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1 Spring

A naturalist is just someone who looks twice. The first look tells you there is a bird on the fence. The second look tells you it is a bluebird, that it is a male, that it keeps returning to the same post, and that it is almost certainly watching a nest box you cannot see from here.

You already know how to look twice. You do it with your friends' faces every day. This almanac is about turning that same attention on the month outside your window.

1.1 What to look for

Spring arrives in an order, and the order is more reliable than the date. Watch for it in this sequence:

- The first green haze on the willows, before any single leaf.
- Frogs calling at night from the wet places. Count how many nights pass between the first caller and the full chorus.
- Robins pulling worms on the lawn at dawn, tilting their heads. They are not listening. They are looking sideways.

1.2 Something to write down

Keep a single line each day: the date, the weather, and one thing you noticed. By June you will have a record no one else has, of your own particular spring, and next year you can race it against this one.

2 Summer

SUMMER is the loud season, and the trick is to sort the loudness into its parts. Sit still for the count of one hundred with your eyes closed and see how many separate sounds you can name. Most people start with three and finish with eleven.

The insects you hear in the afternoon are mostly asking to be married. The ones you hear at night are a different set entirely, working a later shift. If you learn only two songs this summer, learn the cricket and the katydid, because they will tell you the temperature: count the cricket's chirps in fifteen seconds and add thirty-seven, and you have the degrees Fahrenheit, near enough.

2.1 What to look for

- A spider's web at dawn, before the dew burns off. Find the center and the spider will be near it, or hiding at the end of a signal thread.
- The same flower at morning and at noon. Many open and close on a schedule, and a few follow the sun across the sky.

2.2 Something to write down

Pick one small patch of ground, no bigger than a dinner plate, and visit it every week. Write what has changed. A single square foot of summer is more than one person can finish learning.

3 Autumn

AUTUMN is the season of leaving, and almost everything you notice is a departure of one kind or another. The trick is to watch the going-away as closely as you watched the coming, because a year only makes sense from both ends.

The leaves are the obvious drama, but they are also a lesson worth having. A tree does not lose its leaves because the wind takes them. It builds a little wall of cells across the stem of each one, on purpose, and lets them go. The falling is the tree's decision, not the weather's. Pick up a fallen leaf and look at the clean, round scar where it let go: the tree sealed the door behind it.

3.1 What to look for

- Spiders, everywhere, on the one misty morning when you can finally see their webs. They were there all summer; the dew just told on them.
- Birds gathering on wires, then gone one morning. Mark the date. Some years they leave a week early, some years a week late, and only your own notebook will ever tell you which kind of year this was.
- Seeds with wings, seeds with hooks, seeds inside sweetness. Collect five different ones and work out, for each, the deal the plant is offering and who it is offering it to.

3.2 Something to write down

Find one tree you can visit easily and watch it turn. Write the date it shows its first colour, the date it is at its best, and the date the last leaf goes. Three dates, one tree, every year: that is a record a scientist would envy, and it costs you nothing but attention.

4 Winter

WINTER is not empty; it is busy being quiet. The animals that stayed have strategies, and every strategy leaves a mark if you know the season's own kind of looking. In summer you look at things. In winter you look at what things leave behind.

Fresh snow is the best notebook in the world, and it is free. Every animal that crossed the yard last night signed its name in it. A rabbit's tracks come in little triangles, the big back feet landing ahead of the small front ones. A fox walks a straight, purposeful line, as if it has an appointment, which it does.

4.1 What to look for

- Tracks in the morning, before the sun softens them. Follow one set as far as you can and try to guess where the animal was going and why.
- Buds on the bare trees. They are already made, waiting, formed last summer. Winter is not the tree resting. It is the tree ready.

4.2 Something to write down

On the shortest day of the year, write down everything you can hear. Then do it again on the longest day. The two lists, side by side, are the whole year in a single page.

About the author

Wren Calloway leads walks for children who would rather be outside, which is all of them. A teacher and a naturalist, they believe that paying attention is the whole of science and most of joy, and that a child with a notebook is already a scientist. They live near a wood, a field, and a pond, in that order of preference.