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Learn How to Observe

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Follow the steps below to learn how to observe in your back yard.

To view these instructions in Spanish: [Versión en español](#)

Or, learn how to observe if you are part of a [group](#) or at a [public site](#).

1. JOIN NATURE'S NOTEBOOK

Your first step will be to join *Nature's Notebook*. You'll [create your account](#) with a username and password.

Read about joining *Nature's Notebook* below, or view this section of our [How to Observe Handbook](#).

Click below for more information in Video or PowerPoint format.



2. SET UP YOUR ACCOUNT

- Choose a Site
- Choose Plant and Animal Species
- Set Up Your Sites and Species Online

3. START OBSERVING!

- Get Organized To Go Outside
- Record Plant Observations
- Record Animal Observations
- Submit Observations Online

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NUGGETS
[Can or should observers say yes to multiple phenophases?](#)

When making *Nature's Notebook* observations for your species, each of the phenophase observation questions should be treated individually. Your answer to each phenophase question, even though the observation may seem similar to another observation question, may help to discern behavior patterns for the species at a future time. Each observation recorded helps analysts to tease out those specific species' behaviors. So, it is important to record no or yes to seemingly similar questions.

[See all Nature's Notebook Nuggets»](#)

RESOURCES

Take our online course, *Nature's Notebook* 101, and test your skills! The course is available through USGS's Technology Enabled Learning, and will take 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete. Department of the Interior Employees may find the course in DOI Learning, course number USGS-USANPN-001-01.

Download and browse our [Solitary Primer](#) for more information.

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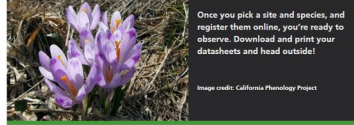
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Once you pick a site and species, and register them online, you're ready to observe. Download and print your datasheets and head outside!

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1. JOIN NATURE'S NOTEBOOK

2. SET UP YOUR ACCOUNT

Read about choosing sites and species below, or view this section of our [How to Observe Handbook](#)

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- Choose Plant and Animal Species
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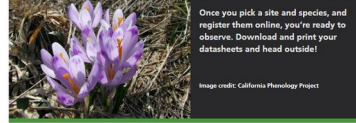
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- Choose a Site

A site is the area within which you will look for your chosen animal species, and which encompasses any plants you choose to observe. When you select a site, such as your yard or a nearby natural area, consider these guidelines:

Convenience: You will be visiting your site(s) regularly, so it should be convenient and easily accessible. Consider your yard or another area that you visit frequently.

Representative location: As much as is practical, the selected site(s) should be representative of the environmental conditions for your area. [More...](#)

Uniform habitat: The conditions of your selected site(s) should be relatively uniform across the site. If you would like to observe two adjacent but distinct habitats, please document them as separate sites. For example, a wetland adjacent to or surrounded by a drier grassland or forest should be documented as a separate site from the grassland or forest.

Appropriate size: A site should be **no larger than 15 acres** (6 hectares or 250 x 250 meters, the size of a pixel from a land surface satellite image), a square with sides the length of 2 1/2 football fields. A site can certainly be smaller than this, and larger areas can be divided into multiple sites. [More...](#)

Proper permission: If you do not own the property where the site is located, you must get permission from the landowner before marking the site, the plants or reporting the site location information (such as latitude/longitude coordinates). [More...](#)

You may want to mark your site, so that you can find it again in the future. [More...](#)

Click below for more information in PowerPoint format.



- Choose Plant and Animal Species
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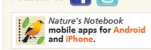
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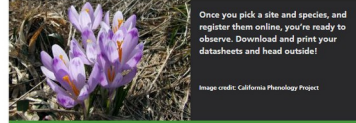


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SELECT PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES

As part of Nature's Notebook, you are invited to observe both plants and animals. Observing phenology is very similar for both, however, because animals move around and plants do not, there is one important difference in the way we ask you to observe the two groups:

For plants: Observe the same individual plants each time you visit your site. For example, you should observe the same red maple in your back yard all through the year.

For animals: Create a checklist of animal species and look for all of them each time you visit your site. For example, if your checklist has robins, wood frogs, and tent caterpillars on it, you should record whether or not you see or hear those species anywhere in your site each time you visit.

Choose one or more species from our [list of plant and animal species](#). For plants, we encourage you to select at least one [plant campaign species](#). For animals, we recommend that you select several species that occur in your local area or in your state.

Make sure that you have correctly identified the plant and animal species at your site before reporting your observations for those species online. [More...](#)

[View Plant and Animal List](#)

SELECT INDIVIDUAL PLANTS

At your site(s) select one or more individuals of each of your chosen plant species to observe. Choose plants that appear to be healthy, undamaged, and free of pests and disease. If you want to observe several individuals of the same species, try to select individuals that are **not direct neighbors**, but are still growing in a **similar environment**. [More...](#)

For annuals (which only survive one growing season) and biennials (which survive for two growing seasons), avoid choosing the first or the last seedling to emerge in the spring since they may not be representative of the larger population at your site. [More...](#)

If your plant grows in a large mass where it is difficult to distinguish or mark individuals, you can choose to monitor the plant as a "patch". [More...](#)

MARKING INDIVIDUAL PLANTS

Because plant monitoring requires that you **observe the same individual plants or patches repeatedly**, you will also need to mark each plant so that you can find it on each visit. We recommend that you mark each individual plant or patch with a **unique label**. For example, you could mark pieces of flagging tape with "red maple-1", "red maple-2", etc. and then tie them to each of the red maples you are observing. [More...](#)

Click below for more information in PowerPoint format.



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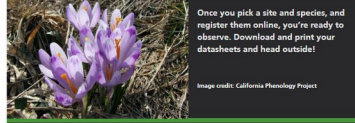
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Add a New Site using the "My Sites" box on the left side of your [Observation Deck](#), and use the map interface to locate your site. You can locate your site using an address, which will be automatically geo-located on the map, by selecting your site on the interactive map, or by typing the latitude and longitude into the boxes below the map. Additional information on this page about your site is optional.

Click below for more information in Video format:



Add a New Plant using the "My Plants and Animals" box on your [Observation Deck](#). Select the correct site from dropdown list of sites. Then click the "Add new plant" link and begin to type the name of your species in the "Plant species" box. Click on one of the suggestions that drops down and then fill in the answers to the remaining questions.

Click below for more information in Video format:



Create an Animal Checklist using the "My Plants and Animals" box on your [Observation Deck](#). Select the correct site from dropdown list of sites. Then, select animal species from the "Species Available" window on the left. You can filter the animals in this list using the "State", "Species group", and monitoring "Partner" dropdown menus. Click the "Add to Checklist" button in the middle to add the species to your list. **Be sure to save your checklist before you switch any filter choices.** Once you are finished adding animals to your checklist, click the "Save checklist" button in the lower left corner of the screen.

Click below for more information in Video format:



Sort your plants and animals using the "My Plants and Animals" box on your [Observation Deck](#). Move your plants and animals by clicking on them and then using the "First", "Up", "Down" and "Last" buttons.

Click below for more information in PowerPoint format.



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Read about gathering and submitting observations below, or view this section of our [How to Observe Handbook](#).

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
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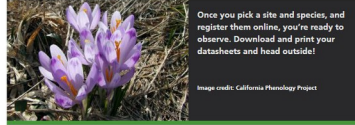
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3. START OBSERVING!

- Get Organized To Go Outside

To make your phenology observations you will need the following items:

- Phenophase definitions and instructions:** Check the profile page for each of your selected plant and animal species to see the list of phenophases for those species and instructions on how to recognize them.
- Datasheets, clipboard, pencil:** You can download and print a datasheet for each plant or animal from the profile page for that species, or generate a personalized datasheet packet from your [Observation Deck](#). [More...](#)
- OR
- Mobile Apps:** Download our *Nature's Notebook* app for [iPhone](#) or [Android](#) and make paperless observations.
- Binoculars** are optional, they are helpful for observing animals as well as phenophases in tall trees

Click below for more information in Video or PowerPoint format.



- [Record Plant Observations](#)
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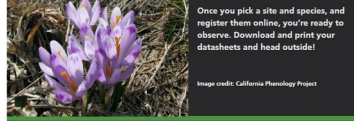


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FOR PLANTS

It's best to visit your site(s) regularly. **One to two times a week** is good, but several times a week or even once a day is even better during times of the year when things are changing quickly (for example, spring and fall). [More...](#)

For plants: Visit each of your individual plants or patches and check their phenophases. For each visit when you make an observation, record the date and time on your plant phenophase datasheet (or [mobile app](#)), and for each phenophase, circle one of the following choices:

- Yes (y)** – if you saw that the phenophase *is* occurring
- No (n)** – if you saw that the phenophase *is not* occurring
- Uncertain (?)** – if you were *not certain* whether the phenophase was occurring
- Do not circle anything if you *did not check* for the phenophase. **It is very important to record this information, even if nothing has changed since your last visit!** Knowing when a plant is *not* in a given phenophase is just as important as knowing when one is. [More...](#)

For most plant phenophases you can also **report on the intensity** (or abundance) that you observe, like the percentage of open flowers you see or how close to full size the new leaves have grown. Phenophase intensity choices vary by species and can be found on the profile page for each species. [More...](#)

If a phenophase, like leaf color change or flowering, begins and ends while you were not observing, you can **make a note of it** in the comments section. [More...](#)

If you are watching for a phenophase and it does not seem to be starting when you expect it would, **continue to watch for it and record that it is not occurring**. This could mean the phenophase is occurring later or not at all in a given year, and this could be very valuable information. [More...](#)

Once a phenophase has ended you should **continue to look for it and record whether or not it occurs again**. Sometimes phenophases will occur a second or third (or more) time in a season, whether because of rain, pests, or changing climate. [More...](#)

If there are phenophases and/or intensity measures on which you do not want to report for a species because you find them too difficult to observe, **just ignore them**. You can cross them out on your datasheets, and do not circle or enter anything for them when you enter your data online.

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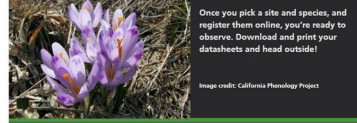


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FOR ANIMALS

Look and listen for all of the species on your animal checklist. You can do this by one of four methods:

- incidental** (chance sighting while not specifically searching)
- stationary** (standing or sitting at a single point)
- walking** (a single pass or transect through your site)
- area search** (multiple passes through your site, possibly crossing the same point more than once)

If you are using one of the last three search methods, try to spend about the same amount of time looking for animals at each visit. We recommend three minutes as a standard, but you can spend as much or as little time as you like. You will probably not see most, or any, of the animals during each visit, which is ok. [More...](#)

For each visit when you make an observation, record the amount of time you spent looking and which of the four methods you used (there is no need to report time for incidental sightings). Record whether or not you saw or heard each animal species on your animal checklist, and for each animal you did see or hear, you will need to fill out the animal phenophase datasheet. On this datasheet record the date and time, and for each phenophase, circle one of the following choices:

- Yes (y)** – if you saw or heard that the phenophase *is* occurring
- No (n)** – if you saw or heard that the phenophase *is not* occurring
- Uncertain (?)** – if you were *not certain* whether you saw or heard that species or that phenophase
- Do not circle anything if you *did not check* for the species or phenophase

It is very important to record this information, even if you did not see a particular animal species! Knowing when an animal is *not* present, or when an animal is *not* in a given phenophase is just as important as knowing when it is. [More...](#)

For most animal phenophases you can also **report on the intensity** (or abundance) that you observe, like the number of individuals you see feeding or the degree of overlap in frog calls. Phenophase intensity choices vary by species and can be found on the profile page for each species. [More...](#)

If a phenophase, like mating or nest building, begins and ends while you were not observing, you can **make a note of it** in the comments section. [More...](#)

If you are watching for a phenophase and it does not seem to be starting when you expect it would, **continue to watch for it and record that it is not occurring**. This could mean the phenophase is occurring later or not at all in a given year, and this could be very valuable information. [More...](#)

Once a phenophase has ended you should **continue to look for it and record whether or not it occurs again**. Sometimes phenophases will occur a second or third (or more) time in a season, whether because of rain, pests, or changing climate. [More...](#)

If there are phenophases and/or intensity measures on which you do not want to report for a species because you find them too difficult to observe, **just ignore them**. You can cross them out on your datasheets, and do not circle or enter anything for them when you enter your data online.

Click below for more information in PowerPoint format.



[Submit Observations Online](#)

Observe

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Become an Observer

My Observation Deck

Learn How to Observe

The Plants and Animals

NATURE'S NOTEBOOK

NUGGETS

Can or should observers say yes to multiple phenophases?

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RESOURCES

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Download and browse our [Binary Primer](#) for more information.

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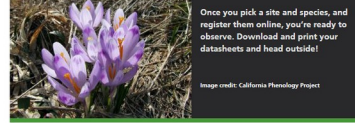
MY OBSERVATION DECK

OBSERVE

FOR GROUPS

MORE WAYS TO CONNECT

[Home](#) > [Observe](#) > [Learn How to Observe](#)



Once you pick a site and species, and register them online, you're ready to observe. Download and print your datasheets and head outside!

Image credit: California Phenology Project

Learn How to Observe

View Edit Track

Follow the steps below to learn how to observe in your back yard.

To view these instructions in Spanish: [Versión en español](#)

Or, learn how to observe if you are part of a [group or at a public site](#).

- 1. JOIN NATURE'S NOTEBOOK
- 2. SET UP YOUR ACCOUNT
 - Choose a Site
 - Choose Plant and Animal Species
 - Set Up Your Sites and Species Online
- 3. START OBSERVING!
 - Get Organized To Go Outside
 - Record Plant Observations
 - Record Animal Observations
 - Submit Observations Online

The final step in observing is to submit your observations online via your Nature's Notebook account.

Use the "Enter Observations" box on your [Observation Deck](#). Select the correct site from the list of sites. Each column below represents one visit's worth of observations at a site. Enter the date and time of your visit at the top of a column, as well as any additional information (e.g., snow on the ground) from your coversheet. Then for each of your plants and animals, click 'y', 'n', or '?' for each phenophase. If you did not check for a particular phenophase, do not click any of the choices. You can report intensity or abundance for any phenophase for which you clicked 'y' or '?' by selecting a value from the "What value?": dropdown menu, or entering a number in the "How many?" box. When you are finished, click the "Submit observations" button in the lower left corner of the screen. [More...](#)

Click below for more information in Video or PowerPoint format.



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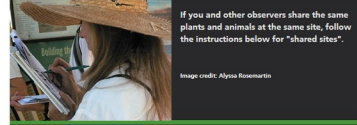
MY OBSERVATION DECK

OBSERVE

FOR GROUPS

MORE WAYS TO CONNECT

[Home](#) » [Learn How to Observe at a Shared Site](#)



If you and other observers share the same plants and animals at the same site, follow the instructions below for "shared sites".

Image credit: Alyssa Rosemartin

Learn How to Observe at a Shared Site

View Edit Track

Follow the steps below to learn how to observe at a group site.

Or, learn how to observe if you would like to [set up a personal site](#).

- 1. [JOIN NATURE'S NOTEBOOK](#)
- 2. [SET UP YOUR ACCOUNT](#)

Observe at a Public Site

A public site is one to which anyone can contribute data. There are several public sites created in *Nature's Notebook*, so follow the instructions below to find one that may be near you. If there are no public sites near you, read our [Shared Sites primer](#) for information on how to create one.

To join a **public site**, head over to your [observation deck](#), and click "Add Public Site" on the bottom left. Select the public site you wish to record observations for, from the list or map and then click "Add Public Site". You'll now see the site in your list of sites on the left panel of your observation deck.

- Observe with a Group
- 3. [START OBSERVING!](#)
- [Get Organized To Go Outside](#)
- [Record Plant Observations](#)
- [Record Animal Observations](#)
- [Submit Observations Online](#)

INTERESTED IN STARTING NATURE'S NOTEBOOK WITH YOUR GROUP?

See examples of how other groups are using *Nature's Notebook*:



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Download and browse our [Botany primer](#) for more information.

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GROUP AND PUBLIC SITES



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Nature's Notebook is a project of the USA National Phenology Network.



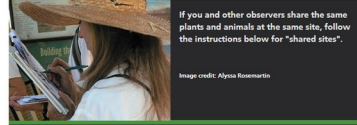


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OBSERVE FOR GROUPS MORE WAYS TO CONNECT

Home » Learn How to Observe at a Shared Site



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Image credit: Alyssa Rosenmartin

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- 1. JOIN NATURE'S NOTEBOOK
- 2. SET UP YOUR ACCOUNT
- Observe at a Public Site
- Observe with a Group

If you are participating in a local, organized effort, you might want to join a group so you have access to their sites. To do so, first make yourself a member of the group in Nature's Notebook. If you've already joined Nature's Notebook, go to your [account page](#) and click "edit". Under "partner groups" select the partner group you wish to join, and click "add," then save your changes at the bottom of the page. If you haven't yet joined Nature's Notebook, add yourself to the partner organization as you [register](#).

Click below for more information in Video format.



Next, go to your [observation deck](#) to find the group site. On the left panel, in the "My Sites" dropdown, you'll find the name of the group you joined. Click on the group name to see the site or sites associated with the group, and submit observations.

If you'd like to start your own local effort and create a group site, visit our [Set up a Shared Site page](#).

- 3. START OBSERVING!
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