For the past decade, I’ve never gone on a long journey or a hike without first packing a journal. I keep a journal to capture the memories that most likely would otherwise fade away, to consciously observe my surroundings and to use as a means for meditation.

I was surprised to discover that many hikers I met last season did not keep a written record of their journey. They gave reasons that I could relate to: a lack of motivation, not finding the time to write or the belief that they aren’t creative enough to keep a journal while on the trail. I have struggled with these issues as well over the years. But just like taking on a long trail such as the PCT, persistence can take you a long way.

In 159 days, I hiked nearly 1,700 miles of the PCT last season. In that time, I filled about 850 pages in four journals. By sharing my journals with you, I hope to show that it is possible to keep a written record while hiking and, hopefully, inspire others to write in a journal that they will cherish for the rest of their lives.

Keeping a trail journal shares many similarities to thru-hiking the PCT. At first, the prospect seems near impossible, but determination carries you forward. As you struggle with gaining your hiking legs, you contend with making time to write about it. It takes dedication and determination to keep a journal. The pages stare back at you, their blankness intimidating, just as the thousands of miles ahead can dishearten. Many thru-hikers told me their early goal of keeping a journal soon faded as they turned their concentration to the hike. They’d say to themselves that they’d spend time on their next zero day in town writing, but by then, their minds had turned to food. Eventually, the journal with its few filled pages was sent home.

Ah, but if only they knew: It gets easier! Just as your body strengthens and the trail miles get easier, so does the journaling. Diligence leads to habits. After a while, you can’t imagine hiking a day without writing about it.

The key is to always keep your journal easily accessible. I kept mine in my breast pocket. Show me a journal stored in a backpack, and
I’ll show you an empty book. You need to have it handy so you can record those fleeting thoughts. I found myself writing in my journal a few dozen times a day, sometimes just long enough to write down a sentence or two. Stopping on the trail might be counterproductive to how far you can hike in a day, but it is possible to write while making the mileage. **Scott Williamson** spent a good 45 minutes chatting with me in Belden, where our treks crossed paths in early September. If he can chat with me for 45 minutes and still hike the PCT in record time, then anyone can make the time to keep a written journal on the trail.

There aren’t any rules to keeping a journal. The motto on the trail is “hike your own hike,” and I add: “journal your own journal!” If you want to just write down daily mileage, how much sleep you got each night, the number of times you dreamt of Julian pies, or how many calories you inhaled at the McDonald’s at Cajon Pass, then I say go for it. I suggest, though, that you also include details that you might want to know many years from now, details about your hike that relatives might want to read about someday. I included updates on how I was feeling, if I was nursing any injuries, how satisfied I was with my hiking progress, and people I met with their contact information. I also wrote down information that might be useful to future hikers: water sources, camping spots, cheapest burgers in towns, etc. I also tried to record as much as I could about my surroundings, the type of terrain I was covering and the plant and animal life.

While hiking allows me to experience the grandness of nature, journaling gives me the ability to capture and reflect on those powerful moments.

I wrote in my journal as if I was writing to a good friend who wanted to know everything about my journey. Who knows, maybe one day many years from now you will have a wide-eyed child on your knee, interested in hearing another story about your adventures on the PCT. Pulling out your dusty journal might be a lot easier than pulling out the memories from the dusty shelves of your mind.
I start all of my journals in the back of the book. Using the straight edge of a playing card, I graph out a mileage spreadsheet. Columns include the day of my hike, the date, the mile of the PCT I ended each day, the number of miles I hiked that day, the number of “plus miles,” or miles off trail, what sort of accommodation I used (T=Tent, RF=Rain Fly, TA = Trail Angel) and my location at the end of the day. Following a long tradition in exploration, I would name each campsite, usually referencing a feeling or experience that occurred during the day or at the campsite. For instance, after sleeping near a pasture of cows, their lowing echoing off of the trees, I named the location “Camp Echoing Cow.”

Here are some of my thoughts and sketches from the third day on the trail. Early on, I played around with starting each journal entry with a mileage stamp, but I would soon move to a time stamp to make it easier. Some of my wildlife sketches were just simple doodles that I hope recorded enough identifying features to look up later.
I made an effort to get postmarks whenever possible. At the tiny post office in Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite National Park, the postal clerk was nice enough to give me an assortment of postmarks, including one made only to be used on June 5, 2010, commemorating National Trails Day.

Trail journaling promotes learning and a gained appreciation of your surroundings. Writing forces you to look around and try to explain what you see. If I’m inspired, I’ll stop and sit down to sketch a flower, tree, or a view “to make its acquaintance and try to hear what it had to tell me,” as John Muir put it. It is the accumulation of these small moments that ended up defining my PCT journey.
I have spent time after my PCT journey filling in the blanks and adding more details. I find it crucial to review and recollect a journey after arriving home. Discovering what I've learned from a long journey on the PCT requires time for reflection. I've spent hours at a coffee shop reading my journals and writing more details in an appendix, which is a separate journal from my “on trail” journals.

During my hikes, I don’t care if the pages of my journal become dirty with grime – and they sometimes do. As long as the ink doesn’t smear into an illegible mess, I don’t care if the book gets a little wet, either. If I come home with a clean book, it wouldn’t represent my journey!
Don’t be afraid to experiment with different ways of keeping a journal, even within one book. Take along a small paint set or colored pencils. I prefer colored pencils, but carrying around a set of 50+ pencils can be cumbersome, taking up a lot of space in my backpack. They’re also a pain to keep organized while outdoors. I thought a lot about how to make a watercolor pencil set for the field. Rather than switch to a small watercolor palette setup, which would be a lot lighter, I wanted to modify my pencils in a way that works best for my style of painting. I decided to make my own ultra-light watercolor pencil palette.

I find that using watercolor pencils rather than watercolor pans allows me more control over the amount of color I add to my journals. I also love the simplicity and minimalistic aspect of applying color using just a drop or two of water from a water brush mixed into the tip of a watercolor pencil. Before I implemented this palette, I would rarely apply a watercolor pencil directly to paper, but rather dab a water pen onto the pencil, then onto the page. This palette made it easier to do this.