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PHENOLOGICAL RECORDS:  
A SUB-GENRE OF NATURE WRITING

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## ABSTRACT

Writers across decades, languages, genders and cultures have all been fascinated by nature and natural subjects. However, a distinct group of nature writers have chosen to address their subject using specific literary themes and structures. Phenological themes and a diary, journal, or almanac structure are the fundamental characteristics of the phenological records sub-genre. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and Marcia Bonta's *Appalachian Autumn* serve as examples of this genre and its defining characteristics. Defining the phenological records genre is vital to the new green movement as people attempt to return to a symbiotic relationship with nature.

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## INTRODUCTION

*There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace (Leopold, 6).*

These words, taken from Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, illustrate the need for a human connection to the natural world. Although Leopold's statement specifically addresses the concrete utilities of nature, his complete book advocates for a total human connection to nature through philosophy, literature, and spirituality.

Aldo Leopold published *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949, in the midst of the first American conservation movement, a movement that sparked a consciousness in the American mind of the vast natural resources of our landscape and, in turn, a desire to protect them. Although the true beginning of this first American conservation movement arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the movement was slow to develop and struggled to find a place in the wider public consciousness. Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Muir were inspired by the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and George Perkins Marsh. These men, and others like them, worked to express their appreciation for our continent's natural resources and initiated the National Parks system and other national protected land systems. America's protected wild places have been enjoyed by generations of Americans as well as visitors from foreign countries. However, in the modern age of technology, a distinct disconnect has developed between people and the natural environment, and a new movement has begun in America with the aim to get people back outside and appreciating the green spaces that still exist. But how do activists get people thinking about nature again? Sharon Cameron writes:

We suppose 'thinking' is the exploration of a delineated subject, and we presume, in addition, that successful thinking has a point, whether it be the solution of a problem or the completion of an idea. What would count as completion apparently involves finding the end of the idea. Such a conception of ideas suggests they are tasks to be worked out and left behind (Cameron, 132).

According to Cameron's consideration of the idea of "thinking," activists need to present the newest green movement as a set of manageable problems with solutions, or as compact subjects that can be addressed and then discarded. Unfortunately, this system of

“thinking” cannot work for the environment – it must be considered holistically, and every day if possible.

Environmental literature provides one option for addressing the environment holistically. But why advocate reading books when just going outside seems a much more direct solution to the problem of societal disconnect from nature? In a world of corporate schedules, technological distractions, and difficult-to-access green spaces, it can be difficult to achieve a daily observation of or interaction with the natural world on a personal level. However, literature has often been a medium through which people may acquire knowledge of things not readily accessible to them, including the natural world. Could the solution to the idea of connecting with nature be found in a literary genre? The list of existing titles that address environmental topics is a cumbersome one, containing works addressing every facet of the environment from every angle and every time period. A single genre would be much more manageable for Americans who do not have time to sift through mountains of environmental books. Therefore, a new genre must be defined, one that addresses nature in a manner accessible to the wide spread of human experience and addresses the environment holistically: phenological records. Why specifically define a new genre? Cheryll Glotfelty addresses the issue from a critic’s standpoint:

Many critics write environmentally conscious criticism without needing or wanting a specific name for it. Others argue that a name is important. It was precisely because the early studies lacked a common subject heading that they were dispersed so widely, failed to build on one another, and became both difficult to access and negligible in their impact on the profession. (Glotfelty, xx)

In other words, providing a specific label for the genre exponentially increases its worth for the literary community, creating the opportunity for an efficacy in the wider world that would be otherwise unattainable. Naming the genre allows it to be studied by critics and appreciated by the public as a distinct set of works in dialogue with one another about a specific, worthwhile subject. To name is to impart power to the genre. Additionally, providing a recognizable label for the genre will allow readers who may already appreciate a book or author that belongs in the genre to explore similar books and expand their reading experience.

The works characteristic of the phenological record genre satisfy two main requirements: they address natural subjects using a basically phenological framework, and they are framed, more or less, in a journal-style structure.

In the existing body of English and American literature, there are countless works addressing natural subjects using a variety of structures. Natural subjects have been examined in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, theater, and prose that is neither fiction nor nonfiction nor poetry. This somewhat confusing method is that which appears most frequently in the phenological records genre; while writing about natural subjects is traditionally categorized as nonfiction, the anthropomorphizing of subjects in these pieces and the philosophical wanderings their authors often transport these narratives into a realm between nonfiction and fiction. Authors who write in this genre present language rich in detail and philosophy, but whose foundation is the real natural world. Phenology, as defined by the USA National Phenology Network

is derived from the Greek word *phaino*, meaning to show or appear. Phenology refers to recurring plant and animal cycle stages... It is also the study of these recurring plant and animal life cycle stages, especially their timing and relationships with weather and climate... Phenology, put another way, is simply *nature's calendar*. (usapn.org)

Consciousness of nature's calendar has served human society from the beginning; the *Farmer's Almanac* testifies to the uses to which humans can put knowledge of nature's cycles. Understanding the flow of nature's cycles helps farmers sow and harvest crops, helps meteorologists predict the weather, and helped to inspire many human holidays. Even on a subconscious level, all humans are connected to the natural environment and its cycles.

Lawrence Buell writes, "Environmental proficiency being a neglected art among the American bourgeoisie, I am all in favor of turning the resources of literature to its remediation whenever possible" (Buell, 97). Although, as described above, all humans are, to one degree or another, connected to the natural world, the consciousness of that connection remains dormant in all but a small group of distinct individuals. Those few who are both perceptive and caring enough to comprehend the human-nature connection and have the talent to share it with others through writing have truly given humanity a

valuable gift. The authors included in the phenological records genre represent this minority. These authors have made it their vocation to study the natural world and learn its intricacies, its language, and then to translate nature's language through their literature in order to increase accessibility for everyday people. While many today may feel trapped within society's chrome boundaries, books in the phenological record genre can free readers and re-awaken in them a consciousness of the vital human-environment connection.

Some critics would argue that, if connection with the natural world through literature is desired, why not encourage the public to read all kinds of books that address environmental topics? I argue that the diary or almanac form adopted by the authors of the works in the phenological record genre lends a feeling of intimacy between the author and the reader that helps facilitate the desired connection. Unfortunately, "the diary has largely been ignored as a subject for serious critical attention... Only infrequently have critics assessed the expressive powers of the better diarists. Even less common has been any serious consideration of the genre" (Kagle, 20). A more comprehensive examination of the diary form, including a defense of the relationship between form and function, is necessary before the true literary value of works using the diary structure may be revealed.

## DIARY AND JOURNAL LITERATURE

As mentioned above, although diaries, journals, and almanacs have been written, published, and read over the ages, there remains within the critical community a bias against considering works in this form as literature. Lawrence Rosenwald writes,

The great English and American diaries are among the most highly regarded and yet systematically neglected of all literary texts. We agree, in conversation or in remarks written *en passant*, that these texts are major works of literature and their authors, major artists; but when doing literary criticism we do not write about them (Rosenwald, 3).

This observation presents the situation clearly: everyday people and great people, specifically great writers, may write diaries or journals addressing any aspect of their lives, yet still the literary community chooses to view these works only in passing. At best, critics can recognize a journal as Thoreau's *Journal* has been considered, merely as the predecessor or gathering place for the ideas that became *Walden*. At worst, a diary could be completely cast off and disregarded without even passing notice, despite philosophical passages that might shed light on the character of the author or events of the time period. For instance, an author's philosophy may develop over time due to changes in the weather or political or social climate.

Why do critics across the board so often disregard the literary value of works structured as diaries and journals? Steven Kagle provides one response:

Another reason given to justify the neglect of diary literature is that the very nature of the diarist's subject matter prevents creative achievement, that, by concerning himself with real rather than fictional events, the diarist has deprived himself of both creative choice and control. Those who support this argument maintain that only in a work not limited by real events is a writer sufficiently free to select and control events to produce a work of value (Kagle, 20).

However, can this argument really be considered valid? Historical novels and other works that, by virtue of genre, base all plot action on real events, are allowed both literary license and the dignity of literary value. Authors and critics alike know that works that contain realistic characters, settings, and situations feel more easily relatable for readers. Furthermore, works that are completely based in fictitious worlds and contain nothing familiar for readers may feel confusing and arduous. While how readers respond to a work does not directly determine the work's literary value or lack thereof, the situation certainly plays a role in critics' decisions. I argue that the works in this genre exhibit literary value, regardless of the possible confinement produced by their basis in reality, because in addition to natural history facts, they include the authors' own philosophical musings and other artistic diversions from pure nonfiction.

As much as the literary value of the diary/journal genre does and will need to be defended in order to establish the literary worth of the phenomenological record genre, I must first establish a definition for the diary genre itself. The most basic definition of the diary

genre may be, “*a record of events or thoughts written as dated periodic entries*” (Kagle, 15). Note the allowance here that a diary may include “*events or thoughts,*” meaning that the term “diary” may be attached to a set of philosophical writings just as it may be attached to a set of daily occurrences. Although this definition is simple to comprehend and apply to pieces of writing, the ease of application may allow the definition to serve too universally to be effective in this situation. Rosenwald provides a more detailed view of the diary:

In form a diary is a chronologically ordered sequence of dated entries addressed to an unspecified audience. We call that form a diary when a writer uses it to fulfill certain functions. We might describe those functions collectively as the discontinuous recording of aspects of the writer’s own life; more technically we might say that to call a text of the proper form a diary we must posit a number of identities: between the author and the narrator; between the narrator and the principal character; and between the depicted and the real, this latter including the identity between date of entry and date of composition (Rosenwald, 5).

The second definition not only addresses form, which is similar to that expressed by the first definition, but also explores the idea of function, which is directly tied to form in many cases. Rosenwald’s idea of diary structure requires a “chronologically ordered sequence of dated entries” written by the author. This idea is contestable, as some diaries and journals are written chronologically without concrete dates, but this assertion will be contested further on. The important message of this passage is the presented view of diary function “as the discontinuous recording of aspects of the writer’s own life.” A diary does not need to be kept every day or contain a strictly thematic set of entries, according to this definition. Rosenwald allows that:

The phrase ‘about his or her own life’ is deliberately and polemically left vague. It is intended generally to allow the definition to conform to the wild diversity of actual diaries... At one moment or another the diary may take on the supplementary functions of introspection or itinerary or confession; none of these functions is intrinsic to it. It is, to be sure, normally a book of the self in the sense that one person keeps it and not many, and in those cases it is also a *revelation* of the self, in the sense that any action is... It may be a book of court gossip, or remarkable providences, or gleanings from other books, or notes on the weather (Rosenwald, 6).

Here, with the phrase “wild diversity,” the critic allows that a diary or journal is a very free medium through which the writer can express him- or herself. The subject matter is not, by this passage, defined or confined to certain aspects of a person or their life or thoughts. According to the analysis so far, the diary genre may include works such as those in question, works that are primarily constructed from records of natural phenomena.

Above, I have determined, with critical support, that the subject of a diary, journal/, or almanac may include whatever the author desires. However, the defining feature of the diary genre is the structure of what is written. Rosenwald writes, “The diary... must be conceived as a book of days and dates and intervals. Whatever functions a diary serves, the writer of it chooses for them a form articulated by dates in chronological order, and a mode of writing spaced over time” (Rosenwald, 6). Although this observation may sound obvious, it is a necessary distinction, and one that requires a bit of analysis. “[A] book of days and dates and intervals” is both a precise and ambiguous assertion. Some diaries include neat entries written in chronological order, one entry per date. On the other hand, some diaries may include several entries for a single day or several days for one entry, and others may include multi-day or even weeklong intervals between entries. Rosenwald’s characterization does not directly designate the format for entries, how they are numerically dated, or how much real time each entry must represent in order for a written piece to be considered a diary. Kagle continues the question: “Are there limits to the brevity of a diary or its individual entries? To what extent can a diarist restrict the number of subjects he or she treats” (Kagle, 16)? If, as Rosenwald makes plain, there is no one right way to organize entries then, as Kagle hints, entries can cover multiple days and multiple or mixed themes. This apparent flexibility in the definite structure of the genre allows for the comparison of works within the phenological records genre as similar, despite their varied structures.

I must return to my defense of the works in this genre on the basis of their literary value, inherent due to their subjects and structures. Even though many literary critics over the years have discounted or completely ignored the genre, there are also many examples of diaries that are considered important contributions to the body of English literature.

But is there an element that sets these works apart from those that are ignored? “Does prior artistic intent or autobiographical conception prevent a work from being a true diary, or is such an intent or conception an essential part of a work of diary literature” (Kagle, 15)? Although prior artistic intent may cause a diarist to pay special attention to his or her language and subject choice, like Thoreau and his *Journal* and *Walden*, other diarists, like Susan Fenimore Cooper, may write simply because the process is therapeutic, and later realize that their personal phenological records hold literary value for a wider audience of readers. Therefore, both can be considered as diaries – careful word choice or artistic intent cannot condemn a work to not be labeled a diary when it fulfills the requirements of structure.

Steven Kagle makes a distinction between journals and diaries. He characterizes diaries as focusing on external concerns, while he maintains that journals are kept for job purposes or are focused on personal thoughts (Kagle, 18). Which term is more appropriate for the genre in question? While the works in the genre I propose are primarily concerned with the environment, which can be categorized as an external concern, each of the works also includes personal observations and details. This confusion means that, although the above discussion helps to define the new genre and determine its form and function characteristics, the new genre label does not include either “diary” or “journal.”

## ECOCRITICISM

The phenological framework that defines the phenological records genre also requires support and defense. The defense for environmentally focused literature actually appears more readily than that of diary literature, in the form of ecocriticism.

In a groundbreaking book that combines essays from many ecocritics, Cheryll Glotfelty established ecocriticism as a distinct branch of literary criticism. Glotfelty describes this new type of criticism:

Some scholars like the term *ecocriticism* because it is short and can easily be made into other forms like *ecocritical* and *ecocritic*. Additionally, they favor *eco-* over *enviro-* because, analogous to the science of ecology, ecocriticism studies relationships between things, in this case, between human culture and the physical world. Furthermore, in its connotations, *enviro-* is anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment. *Eco-*, in contrast, implies interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts (Glotfelty, xx).

Glotfelty's thorough analysis of the name for her designated school of criticism sheds light on why works in this genre and the genre in question deserve the attention of both critics and the public. As Glotfelty observes, an ecological perspective and an environmental perspective are vastly different. Environmental studies concentrate on facets of the environment, pieces of the whole, while ecology studies how all the pieces of the environment interact to create the whole. And unlike environmental studies, ecology does not belong solely to its own realm of science. As William Howarth writes, "As a vernacular science, ecology was widely adopted by many disciplines to read, interpret, and narrate land history" (Howarth, 74). Howarth's use of the verbs "read, interpret, and narrate" lends to ecology an air of criticism in its own right: ecology as a critical technique for the natural world. This idea can be explored through the works included in the phenological records genre, as the ecological observations recorded serve as analysis and criticism of natural systems and humans' relationship to or place within these systems.

Glotfelty also makes a distinction between the anthropocentricity of environmental studies and the interdependent nature inherent to ecology. Again, ecology differs from other natural sciences because of its focus on systems and humans' roles within natural systems. All too often, the anthropocentric view is the one adopted by scientists and critics of literature alike. However, as Neil Evernden observes, "How can the proper study for man be man if it is impossible for man to exist out of context? For the ecologist, then, the desire of some in the humanities to deal only with the fragment of reality they term 'human' is nonsense" (Evernden, 95). Indeed, the environment is the context in which humans survive, so it is only appropriate that humans and the

environment be studied in a connected or ecocentric way, as through ecology and, subsequently, ecocriticism. The works included in the phenological records genre best demonstrate the contextualization afforded through ecocriticism; the authors interacted with the environment in such a way that the works would not exist without the presence of nature, and the authors would be thought of differently (or not thought of at all) without the uniquely interrelated perspectives of their works.

But why should such a distinction be made between works that are anthropocentric and those that emphasize interrelationships? The cause of this distinction is the feeling of “otherness” so often present when humans think or talk about the environment. The view of the environment as “other” presents several problems, not the least of which is suggested by Christopher Manes, “For human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another” (Manes, 16). Indeed, the sentiment is echoed clearly in Dr. Seuss’ children’s book, *The Lorax*. Both Manes and Seuss expose the problem that occurs when humans view nature as “other”: a utilitarian view supplants any moral or ethical considerations, and the environment is mistreated. It is only when, through works like those included in the phenological records genre, humans regain an understanding of how our species fits within the environment instead of existing as separate from it, that we can appreciate and protect the Earth. Harold Fromm synthesizes this idea: “Thus ‘the problem of the environment,’ which many people persist on viewing as a peripheral arabesque drawn around the ‘important’ concerns of human life, must ultimately be seen as a central philosophic and ontological question about the self-definition of contemporary man” (Fromm, 38). No longer can humans afford to view the Earth and the environment as “other”; if we do not change our perspectives, Fromm suggests that our species identity and perhaps very existence may hang in the balance. The writers in the phenological records genre have taken the first steps toward reintegrating human lives with the natural environment. If the literary community can come to accept the genre and the works it includes as valuable, then the human race will be much closer to realizing the true interrelatedness that exists between our species and the wider Earth.

While it is true that the human disconnect from nature may be cured through any number of means, it is imperative that literature is maintained as a medium for healing the rift between humanity and the environment. This consideration acquires more significance when we consider that many ideas, including some environmental topics, cannot be adequately addressed via audio or visual media. Reading is one of the chief ways that humans acquire knowledge; therefore, “An ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is its most important task. For how can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them” (Glotfelty, *xxiv*)? Glotfelty returns us to the idea of initiating the thinking process through literature. Admittedly, nothing any author writes can forcibly cause any reader to act or react in any particular way. But the power of suggestion embedded in literature is a powerful tool when used to inspire critical thinking. Glotfelty explores this relationship between literature and human thought:

If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, ‘Everything is connected to everything else,’ we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact (Glotfelty, *xix*).

Ecology in this instance becomes both the subject at hand in the literature, as well as a metaphor for how literature exists in human society. Literature, humanity, and the natural environment must all exist in context with one another, inseparable and interrelated, requiring one another’s existence in order to be whole. Although this relationship is reciprocal in all directions, at this point in human history it seems that nature needs literature more than perhaps ever before. Manes clarifies this need by observing that, “Nature *is* silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Manes, 15). This critical observation continues the echo of Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax*, in which the character the Lorax acts as a speaker for the trees and animals because they cannot speak for themselves. Manes here states that the natural environment does not possess a speaking voice that allows it to be in dialogue with humans in any

generally accepted form of rhetoric. However, as Glotfelty and others have observed, ecoauthors and ecocritics can and do give a voice to the natural environment through their literature and analysis. Through careful personal observation and analysis, the authors of the phenological records genre succeed in mirroring the wonders of the Earth and giving the natural environment a voice through literature.

## DEFINITION OF GENRE

At last we have arrived at an understanding of the two parent genres, diary literature and ecocriticism, which when combined lay the foundation for the new genre I propose, phenological records. Lawrence Buell writes: “It is easy to persuade oneself on the basis of the average critical discussion of these works that the literary natureescape exists for its formal or symbolic or ideological properties rather than as a place of literal reference or as an object of retrieval or contemplation for its own sake” (Buell, 85). It is true that, although each of the works in the phenological records genre may serve as a pleasant read, if a person wishes, they may also serve to edify and clarify one’s knowledge and understanding of our human role within the Earth’s ecosystems. But although I have presented a thorough discussion of the two parent genres, the phenological records genre itself still seems tenuous in characteristics and utility.

My concrete definition for the phenological records genre will begin then with an analysis of structure. As mentioned at the conclusion of the section on diary literature, I have chosen “records” as the most appropriate label for the structure of the works in this genre. Although many of the works are structured as diaries or journals, others are structured as almanacs, which, though not as precisely structured as diaries, are more structured than mere prose, and so also are provided a place in this genre. Works included in this genre may, as in Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* or Henry David Thoreau’s *Journal* or Marcia Bonta’s *Appalachian Autumn*, be structured as pure diaries. These pieces contain entries clearly delineated from one another by their posted chronological dates. Conversely, other works in the phenological records genre may follow the flow of chronological time with less concrete structure, as do Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* and Henry Beston’s *The Outermost House*. Narratives such as these contain “chapters” or passages encapsulating roughly one month or one season’s duration, but each passage addresses its month or season holistically, rather than fragmenting it into daily observations. Finally, Ned Smith’s *Gone for the Day* presents a third, hybrid structure that is included in the phenological records genre. This piece, and others like it, is broken down into monthly sections like the second structure category

with monthly narratives, but then also includes specific chronologically dated entries like the first structure category.

After this brief exploration of the three structural variations present in the phenological records genre, it is now possible for me to develop a statement defining the characteristic structure of literary works in the genre. Pieces of literature included in the phenological records genre may cover a month, a season, or a year or years with entries that somehow delineate the smaller parts of the whole (days, months, or seasons); these delineations may be in the form of conventional diary-style dates, names of months or seasons, or terminology that somehow indicates the subject of the entry. This definition clearly illustrates and allows for the multiple structures included in the proposed genre.

The next step to firmly establish the characteristics of my proposed genre is to discuss subject matter and composition style. A well-known adage for literary critics, “form complements function” will come into play considering the phenological records genre. Although the requisite structure for works in this genre has been defined above, a connection exists between the chosen structure and the subject matter and overall feel of a work in this genre. Steven Kagle observes that, “In order to create a work of literary art a diarist must be creative in the way he lives his life as well as in the way he writes about it” (Kagle, 22). Therefore, although the requisite structure for my proposed genre is defined above, a work does not fit within this genre simply because it possesses the outlined structure. In order to have a true diary or almanac feel, and therefore be welcome in the phenological records genre, a piece of writing must relay the character and intellect of the diarist to the reader. The most common methods seen in the texts of the phenological records genre are diversions from the phenological study where the authors supply their own philosophical meanderings as related to their observations of nature. Additionally, many authors, including Leopold and Bonta, structure their writing in such a way that some or all entries, or the entire work may contain one or several coherent plotlines.

To continue the discussion of “form complements function,” we can now move more concretely into the requisite subject matter for texts in the phenological records genre. As defined in the Introduction, phenology is the study of nature’s cycles. This

terminology best articulates the subject matter of the works in this genre, and the form or structure of the works (diary/almanac-style entries encompassing seasons or years) fits precisely with the cyclical subject matter. An author wishing to record observations of natural cycles could find no better structure for his or her writing than a daily, monthly, or seasonal records like a diary or an almanac because, by its nature, time itself is central to the study of phenology.

But in order to explore the characteristics of the genre further I must first delve more directly into what phenology means and how it can be used. What is a natural cycle? A simple answer to this question may seem obvious, but a more comprehensive answer requires careful explanation. A simple understanding of natural cycles can be gained by discussing the life cycle of an amphibian or an insect, an example often used to establish a working understanding of natural cycles for schoolchildren. These example cycles can be depicted with small circular illustrations comprised of anywhere from three to six steps. Other natural cycles like these include plant life cycles and moon phases. Cycles of this magnitude can be easily observed from beginning to end without much trouble. However, not all cycles in nature appear as concisely as these example life cycles. Weather patterns, temperature variations, nutrient cycles and the water cycle flow over a much longer time period and include many more intermediate steps, making them much more difficult to follow from beginning to end. However, observing even a portion of any of these cycles, such as the decay of a dead animal over a month or the number of days in a year with thunderstorms, may still be considered a phenological study (usapn.org). Therefore, recording any part of any natural cycle, from the simplest insect life cycle to the most complex geologic cycle, can be considered a phenological observation and may be present as subject matter in a work in the phenological records genre.

Why is studying phenology important? Again, as mentioned in the Introduction, phenology lays the basis for many scientific disciplines, such as meteorology, biology, chemistry, ecology, forestry, etc. Meteorologists study weather patterns, geologists study soil cycles, biologists study nutrient cycles. Although the study of phenology seems important enough for these scientific disciplines, it is the application of these

observations by farmers, foresters, game managers, and others that truly demonstrates the utility of phenology (usapn.org). However, the obvious human applications with financial gain as the end-goal are not the only reasons to study phenology. Observing phenological cycles helps humans gauge the health of our planet, whether we are measuring temperature trends (to determine and measure global climate change), bird populations (which showed the impact of DDT), or macro-invertebrate populations (to determine water quality). While I have only presented a few examples here, the implications for the utility of phenology are truly vast.

Another value for phenology lies in its application in literature. Although phenology is a term borrowed from ecology, I demonstrate through its application to my proposed genre that the term should be adopted into the lexicon of terms available to literary critics and authors alike. Certainly, the authors of the phenological records genre have put the study to good use. When an author chooses to write about nature or a landscape, the subject choices are vast, but phenology offers a focused system through which to observe, record, and narrate nature. Additionally, because translating natural subjects into abstract language poses another difficulty, phenology again serves to focus authorial choices to assist narrative continuity, flow, and aesthetic quality.

There is one final factor that I wish to add as a part of the requirements for works in the phenological records genre. This factor is not purely a requirement for subject matter – it is a requirement for the tone of the overall work. Any piece of literature in the phenological records genre must present an overall sense of place. What is sense of place? Neil Evernden explains:

We achieve... the sensation of knowing, the sensation of being part of a known place... It is sufficient that it serve as an analogy for the kinds of attachment we do form... In other words, there appears to be a human phenomenon, similar in some ways to the experience of territoriality, that is described as aesthetic and which is, in effect, a 'sense of place,' a sense of knowing and of being a part of a particular place (Evernden, 100).

Sense of place is something that each and every person feels in his or her own space, wherever that may be. It is the feeling of comfort and belonging we have when in a place, whether it is a city, a park, or a mountainside. While we each feel this sensation about our

own place or places, a sense of place can also be presented in literature. When authors of the phenological records genre record their observations of natural places, they present an immersed sense of place in their narratives. Donelle Dreese writes, “[t]he sense of place within each of us is very sensual. It engages all of our senses on a daily basis until we may hardly be aware of what we see, smell, hear, or feel in the place we call home. But it is also highly mental and emotional” (Dreese, 2). The authors in the proposed genre meticulously record the details of their places through phenology, using their senses and philosophies to distill into their writings the true sense of place for each place described. Often, the sense of place in a narrative from this genre may be so strong as to inspire a sense of that place in the reader, even if the reader has never before been to that place! The possibility of this strong connection between author, narrative, and reader demonstrates the literary value of works in the phenological records genre, as well as their possible efficacy in the struggle to get Americans to discover deeper appreciations for the natural environment.

After demonstrating the literary context for the new phenological records genre by examining the two parent genres, diary literature and ecocriticism, I established the phenological records genre through concrete definition and defining characteristics. However, my defense of the phenological records genre would not be complete without providing an analysis of two narratives that serve as examples of the phenological records genre.

## LEOPOLD

The first text I will analyze as a representative of the phenological records genre is Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*. Aldo Leopold was a conservationist, forester, and farmer at different points in his life, but his first encounters with the American landscape were far from caring and conservative. Leopold, like so many of his generation, was taught to look first to the utility of the land’s resources. It was only after years of “harvesting” the land that Leopold realized he actually wanted to live in

harmony with and learn from the land. Therefore, as Susan Flader observes, despite his past

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) is best known as the author of *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), a volume of nature sketches and philosophical essays recognized as one of the enduring expressions of an ecological attitude toward man and land. To many who know him through these essays, he is akin to Thoreau because of his keen observation, his philosophic penetration, and his clarity of expression (Flader, *xvii*).

As Flader mentions, Thoreau is often regarded as the master of phenological records writing, as he kept a phenological journal for 24 years. Since both Thoreau and Leopold belong to the phenological records genre, and since critics often draw similar comparisons between the two authors, critical analysis of Thoreau's *Journal* will serve to support an analysis of Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*.

First, however, Leopold's book must be firmly established as a viable example of the phenological records genre. To return, we must assess *A Sand County Almanac* against the definition provided in the first section of this chapter. *A Sand County Almanac* is, as the title suggests, structured loosely as an almanac encompassing a full year. Leopold compiled 22 of his own original essays to create the *Almanac*. He assigned one or more essays, each with its own title, to sections labeled with the names of each of the 12 months of the year. The essays were not all written based on one or two particular years; instead, they draw upon Leopold's observations over the years that he lived and worked in Sauk County, Wisconsin. However, the *Almanac* follows the chronological flow of a year, and the entries are delineated by months, thereby earning *A Sand County Almanac* a solid place in the phenological records genre. Further, since all of the essays are based on the cumulative knowledge of years of natural observations and focus on natural phenomena, Leopold's *Almanac* definitely satisfies the phenological requirement. Finally, all 22 of the essays in *A Sand County Almanac* focus on the title locale, Sauk County, Wisconsin. The specific place chosen coupled with the emotions with which Leopold describes his place establish a tangible sense of place in this narrative. Although this brief analysis of Aldo Leopold's famous book has established its role as a member of the phenological records genre, a more in-depth exploration of the work will provide

insight into the subtleties of the genre as well as the potential utility of these pieces of literature.

We begin then with Leopold's January section and the sole essay in this section, "January Thaw" (Leopold, 3-5). The very first phrase of this essay, "Each year," introduces the phenological approach of the entire book. Leopold's phenological study is further attested to in this paragraph by the mention of skunk hibernation and the most telling sentence: "[The skunk's] track marks one of the earliest datable events in that cycle of beginnings and ceasings which we call a year." This statement deliberately uses the word "cycle," showing the reader that Leopold does not want to cloak the phenology present in his writing. The phrase "earliest datable events" sounds almost as if Leopold were proposing a holiday. Since his book is structured as an almanac, we can only assume that Leopold wishes in the *Almanac* to log all of the little natural "holidays" he observes throughout the year, beginning with the re-emergence of the post-hibernation skunk and concluding, in the final essay for December, with the winter roosting of resident chickadees. The idea of celebrating natural holidays is expressed best in Thoreau's "Kalendar" project and as published in *Wild Fruits* after his death, a ten-year chronicle of the precise bloom dates of plants and other phenological observations Thoreau recorded, and which now can be used to track global climate changes. Another of Leopold's striking January sentences, "There is time not only to see who has done what, but to speculate why," even more firmly establishes the author's position as observer and recorder of all phenological goings-on. Additionally, this statement makes way for the philosophical comments that pepper the entire *Almanac*; Leopold is not only observing, he is also wondering and analyzing. The January section of the *Almanac* also introduces readers to the way Leopold has chosen to structure his essays. Most of the essays present in the *Almanac* are separated internally into smaller sections focusing on different parts of nature or the narrative. This further structuring beyond that of the conventional almanac or journal structure alleviates a concern voiced by Sharon Cameron about Thoreau's *Journal*: "In lieu of conventionally dictated foci, we are prevented from easy assurance about how to describe the entry's subjects" (Cameron, 57). Cameron's complaint for Thoreau's *Journal*, one widely applicable as a critical complaint of literary

journals and almanacs in general, is that the various subjects of the entries are not easily discernable from one another, and therefore are difficult to categorize. In the passage in which this statement occurs, it seems that Ms. Cameron would like to create a numerical catalogue of how many times an author addresses each subject in a work of literature. However, it seems irrational to voice this complaint about the diary genre, since diaries are in essence a fluid conglomeration of events and observations. Furthermore, the complaint is rendered completely moot when one acknowledges that phenological records cannot have their subject matter parsed and organized; the ecological and sequential foundation of the genre indicates that all subject matter is connected and cannot be sundered. This is especially true because nature does not present objects or ideas singularly or in an orderly fashion.

The second entry in the *Almanac* is the essay for February, “Good Oak” (Leopold, 6-18). This essay is much longer than the first, and its subject matter is vastly different from that of the January essay as well. Whereas the January essay concerns the activities of a few animal species on a winter’s morning, the “Good Oak” essay encompasses a history of the land through a single tree and its connection to the humans harvesting it. The essay begins with Leopold’s observations about the birth of the tree he has cut and is at the time of present in the essay burning in his fireplace. He notes that there is a strong connection between oak tree growth and rabbit population fluctuations, a true ecological and phenological observation that Leopold supports with his own personal observational evidence and a hypothetical future scientific study. But what is truly unique about this essay is the history it imparts to the reader about the oak tree and the landscape it occupied. Sharon Cameron voiced another complaint against Thoreau’s *Journal*:

the monotony of a record which focuses for twenty-four years on cyclical change; because of the plotlessness and discontinuity of the story of that change (the thread of coherence being the repetition of the seasons); because of the progressive refusal to interpret the observations recorded, as if the significance of the tree were the description of that tree; because of how minimally human contacts are noted in the *Journal* (Cameron, 4-5).

Again, Cameron demonstrates her lack of familiarity with the beautiful nuances of phenological records, but Leopold’s writing stands to alleviate these concerns. Ms.

Cameron's complaints about the *Journal* and similar literature are: 1) the "monotony" of observation over 24 years, 2) the "plotlessness" of phenological study, 3) an assumed "refusal to interpret" phenological observations, and 4) "how minimally human contacts are noted." Aldo Leopold's essay "Good Oak" can be applied to answer each of these concerns over qualities of literature in the phenological records genre. First, Cameron's complaint of Thoreau's journal-writing for 24 years is rendered entirely moot when we consider that Leopold's essay covers more than 80 years of a single tree's history as part of the landscape; although Thoreau's entire *Journal* is more unwieldy in its length as compared to "Good Oak," the actual covered timelines are inverse. Second, "Good Oak" and other essays in *A Sand County Almanac* demonstrate that phenology is anything but "plotless" – every natural cycle tells the story of the organisms playing roles in that cycle. Unfortunately, those stories may not always be explicitly told in the narrative of phenological records, but usually authors give enough hints that imaginative readers, unlike Cameron, should be able to read the story themselves. Third, Ms. Cameron maintains that authors of the phenological records genre "refuse to interpret" their phenological observations. However, this is hardly the case. An author can hardly prevent him- or herself from analyzing the natural phenomena he or she observes; the analysis may not be structured in a way familiar to most literary critics, but that does not mean it does not exist. *Walden* serves as Thoreau's "interpretation" and distillation of the ideas in his *Journal*. In "Good Oak," Leopold analyzes the oak's relationship to the rabbit population and the land. An addendum to her complaint, "as if the significance of the tree were the description of the tree," is also completely negated by the "Good Oak" essay: a single tree can bear as much significance as any observer may place on it. Finally, and most egregiously, Sharon Cameron complains of the "minimal" description of human contacts she observes in books in the phenological records genre. This complaint is faulty on two accounts. First, many phenological records do include human contact; in "Good Oak," Leopold uses the sawdust from the oak's rings to follow the human history of the land backward through time. Human existence and human interaction are also present in many of Leopold's other essays, and in Marcia Bonta's writings as well. Writers in this genre simply cannot ignore human effects on the land, and the inability to ignore shows

in the subjects they choose and the way in which they write. But if Ms. Cameron looks to other passages from phenological records, she is indeed correct in observing that some passages are devoid of human deeds. This seems only fitting. During the discussion of ecocriticism I examined how anthropocentric literary critics tend to be, and this is a strong example of that mistake. When literature like these pieces focuses on nature, it should be enjoyed for the chosen subject, not attacked because, for once, humans are not in the spotlight. To discount nature and nature writing because humans are not present is to condemn wilderness untouched by human influences as useless and unworthy of our consideration and respect.

While the first two essays in *A Sand County Almanac* each cover several topics, the March essay, “The Geese Return,” focuses solely on the title topic, geese (Leopold, 18-23). This essay is a classic example of phenological study at its finest. In it, Leopold systematically lists his observations about the return of the geese to his farm’s marsh in March, adding his own running commentary on their behavior, and his philosophy as pertaining to geese and their habits. He begins by explaining that geese and the observation thereof herald the true beginning of spring, since they cannot renege on their flight if it is too cold once they reach their spring and summer homes. Further, Leopold ties human observance of geese to the geese’s own powers of observation, comparing geese flights during autumn and spring to demonstrate that the geese are keenly aware of hunting seasons. He next catalogues the behaviors of the geese once they are settled in the marsh, including the noises they make and their food preferences. The following observations are the most striking, however. Leopold mentions lone geese intermixed in the flocks, and after hypothesizing as to the reasons for their aloneness, details a ecological study he and his students conducted over the course of several years that confirmed his suspicions about the lone geese. With these observations we see the value of phenological studies for science (ecological understanding) as well as for literature (ecological compassion). The concluding section, separate from the rest of the essay, is based only loosely on the aforementioned geese. Instead, these last few paragraphs extrapolate from Leopold’s observations of the geese and apply them to his own personal

philosophy about world politics. The concluding passage is testament to the extremely versatile applications for phenological studies.

The rest of the essays in *A Sand County Almanac* follow the trends of these first three example essays, although each subsequent essay possesses its own unique qualities. However, a list of similarities can be made for the essays in Leopold's book. For instance, many of his essays address birds, whether they are songbirds or game birds. Leopold's fascination with wildlife is not exclusive to birds, as he also examines fish and mammalian behavior in his essays. Similar to the February essay on the oak tree, Leopold also examines the life cycle of the river flowing through his farm in at least two of the essays. Through all of the essays, Leopold's phenological observations and sense of place contribute emotion, clarity, and resonance to his writing. As Flader writes,

*A Sand County Almanac* represents the distillation of a lifetime of observation and reflection on the interrelations of ecology, esthetics, and ethics. Through it Aldo Leopold speaks to the present generation as he will to the future. The essays have a timeless quality, dealing as they do with ecological and evolutionary processes. Yet their strength comes from history, from Leopold's experiences in time, on the land (Flader, 35).

Indeed, just as Flader suggests, Leopold's writings, though written specifically about his farm in Sauk County, Wisconsin, have a much wider appeal across geography and time. People still read *A Sand County Almanac* today, and it is used as an instructional tool for students of ecology and literature. Leopold's phenological record demonstrates a real and lasting utility for the study and presentation of phenology through literature. As Susan Flader notes, "Through all his efforts he was dedicated to the conviction that we would never solve our conservation problems on a large scale until we as a people had attained an ecological attitude toward our environment" (Flader, *xvii*). It is clear that Leopold hoped that, as people read his *Almanac* and other books like it, they would begin to think and live with more ecological consideration based on greater understanding.

The second representative of the phenological records genre is Marcia Bonta's *Appalachian Autumn*. Marcia Bonta is a contemporary naturalist and writer from south central Pennsylvania. For years she has lived on and written about acreage she owns in the Appalachian Mountains called Plummer's Hollow. This very special area is full of biodiversity and human-nature interaction, inspiring Bonta's personal phenological studies as recorded in five separate books. As one of the newest writers in the phenological records genre, literary critics have not yet seriously considered Bonta's works. However, this contemporary author has certainly earned her place in the genre with her four nature books, *Appalachian Spring*, *Appalachian Summer*, *Appalachian Autumn*, and *Appalachian Winter*. I have chosen Marcia Bonta's second published book, *Appalachian Autumn*, to analyze as a representative of her work and demonstrate her place in the phenological records genre.

*Appalachian Autumn* can be firmly situated in the phenological records genre by applying my established definition of required characteristics. This book is structured very much like a traditional journal: each day from September 1 to December 21 (the span of autumn according to the calendar) is represented by a single entry labeled with the appropriate date. Some entries are longer than others, but each day for the span of those four months is accounted for. Furthermore, Bonta delineates the months in her book by separating them into chapters, prefaced by both an introduction and a prologue, and followed by an epilogue, in order to give readers a context in which to read the journal. These structural parameters satisfy the required characteristics for the phenological records genre supplied by diary literature and its structure. Next we arrive at the question of phenology. At first, the quality of cycles is brought into question because Bonta's journal appears to cover only a single autumn. However, upon closer examination, we realize that Bonta has chosen to write the journal in this particular autumn, but that she is using the described autumn as a representative of all of the autumns she has experienced at Plummer's Hollow. Her observations are voiced in such a way as to demonstrate years of experience with all of the seasons in the Appalachian Mountains, and her observance of the autumnal parts of the cycles is recorded in *Appalachian Autumn*. Therefore, although it may at first not seem clear, this book (and its partners for the other three

seasons of the year) strongly displays phenological study. Finally, Marcia Bonta's *Appalachian Autumn* contains an overwhelming sense of place due to her personal connection to the land she owns and lives on. Although this cursory analysis clearly shows that Marcia Bonta's *Appalachian Autumn* belongs in the phenological records genre, this book contains a wealth of literary value that is worth exploring.

Plummer's Hollow is not just a location nestled in the Appalachian Mountains of Pennsylvania. Instead, it is the home of Marcia Bonta and her family and the natural environment they treasure. Bonta's sense of place exudes from her writing in such an accessible way that readers who are familiar with the ecology she describes can nod their heads and smile knowingly, while readers who are unfamiliar with the ecology learn to love what they see through Bonta's words and imagery. The map placed in the front matter of the book introduces readers to the geography of Bonta's haunts so that as they read they can follow her paths through the woods, and clearly understand the conflict between her land and that belonging to her neighbor, the lumberman. Bonta clearly loves her place, and she writes with strong emotions:

If only Americans would learn that there is a whole universe of interest in their own backyards, despite the allure of travel to more exotic places... So much nature writing today... celebrates the faraway... Backyard naturalists... should be encouraged to watch and learn. Until a majority of people learn to appreciate the natural world through their own observations, I fear that we will continue to destroy it (Bonta, 130).

As demonstrated by this passage, not only does Bonta feel strongly about her own place – she fervently wishes that all people would acquire, through patient observations like hers, their own senses of their own places. She argues that sense of place is important to people not only by virtue of citizenry in a place, but also because sense of place generates a stewardship of the land, one that is sorely needed in today's world. Bonta encourages “backyard naturalists... to watch and learn,” asking everyday people to engage in simple phenological studies in order to gain a greater sense of place.

Phenological study is a defining feature of Marcia Bonta's *Appalachian Autumn*. Her meticulous daily record shows the beautiful nuances of the transition from summer to autumn in the Appalachian Mountains with stunning detail. She often chooses just one

factor of the environment, whether it be a bird or a mushroom or a plant, on which to focus each of her daily entries. For instance, the entire entry for September 19 focuses on mushrooms discovered after a rainy spell. Bonta spends a full paragraph describing one particularly interesting mushroom, a stinkhorn, which she found in the woods on this date. She provides the scientific name of the mushroom, a method present throughout the book in order to clarify her subjects. Bonta has a unique approach to such specific identification. If she is familiar with a species, the yellow-rumped warbler for example, Bonta records possibly every instance of sighting over the four-month span. If Bonta is not familiar with a sedentary species, such as a mushroom on the ground or a salamander in her toilet, she will take the time to properly identify it and provide the reader with its scientific name and a discussion of what she has learned about the species. However, if she is unfamiliar with a non-sedentary species, such as the many “confusing fall warblers” she encounters, Bonta is nonchalant and does not agonize over the lack of identification. Her distinctive attitude toward identification lends to Bonta’s writing an air of familiarity that allows readers to feel at ease, rather than feeling overwhelmed by her phenology.

Bonta’s day-by-day approach to her writing is perfectly suited to a precise record of phenological observations. Each entry is rife with detail concerning natural phenomena and the cycles that all parts of nature experience. As mentioned above, although the journal for *Appalachian Autumn* was written in a single year, Bonta made full use of her years of phenological experience to compare and support her phenological observations in the book. For example, on November 27 she writes:

Although statistically Indian summer is most likely to occur between November second and November sixth, lately the bouts of warm weather have continued sporadically until the winter solstice in mid-December. We *should* be having cold and wind, grayness and freezing rain. Instead we continue to have hazy, lazy days that keep me outside from dawn till dusk (Bonta, 168).

Even though she expresses enthusiasm for the warm weather that allows her to continue venturing outside to explore and observe deep into the autumn season, in this passage Bonta uses her accumulated phenological knowledge to document global climate change as it affects her small corner of the world. In fact, many of the entries in *Appalachian*

*Autumn* contain not only phenological observations, but connections between observations to create a wider working picture of Bonta's environment. As another example of the connections she draws between phenological observations, Bonta writes about the time frames in which several shrubs display their fall fruits on October 4:

So... bird migration, plant dispersal and early leaf color are linked together, demonstrating once again that in nature everything is connected to everything else, in intricate and often little-understood ways, producing a finely tuned system that has continued to evolve over the millennia. To destroy even one link may be disastrous to an entire system" (Bonta, 67).

Bonta's separate observations in this entry include her neighbor's logging, a close encounter with a fox, the appearance of autumn berries and foliage coloration, and autumn bird migration. The final two sets of observations are then consolidated into the deduction shared above, indicating that, similar to Leopold, Bonta cannot help but analyze the parts of nature that she observes so closely and come to her own conclusion, often aided by consultation with experts.

Although Bonta wrote *Appalachian Autumn* as a journal, she filled it with expert facts and citations to support her phenological claims. To return to the September entry on mushrooms, after Bonta explores her discovered mushroom's physical characteristics and relates a family anecdote about the utility of wild mushrooms, she launches into a deeper explanation of how mushrooms work using expert support. In this entry Bonta specifically cites a particular mycologist, George Barron, but the tone of her entry after this citation takes on a tone more similar to an encyclopedia than a journal, suggesting that much of the rest of this entry was written from research rather than personal experience with the predatory hyphae of mushrooms. Citing external sources lends to Bonta's writing an educational tone that supports her own personal phenological observations. This support is important in demonstrating the utility of phenology, but it becomes even more important when Bonta ventures into the tricky realm of anthropomorphism. For instance, on October 10 Bonta observes a pair of squirrels playing in grapevines hanging from a tall tree:

Those squirrels seemed to exhibit a caring, almost loving attitude toward each other, something I had never observed so clearly before in wild animals. I have read books by people who have been close to wild animals and who have written about the very qualities I was observing. But it is one thing to read about it and another to see it for yourself” (Bonta, 81).

It is often considered taboo in the literary profession to revert to anthropomorphizing when writing about natural subjects, and it seems like even more of a crime when we consider Bonta is writing a literary journal based on scientific observation. However, just as she states at the end of the passage, Bonta is certainly not the first to subscribe to this practice in some small measure. Many authors, and even scientists, have delved into anthropomorphism as a way to compare nature to humanity so that the wider community can relate. In her September 28 entry Bonta shares the story of Edwin Way Teale, a naturalist who studied praying mantises. Teale apparently kept one mantis, which he named Dinah, as a pet, and his descriptions of her suggest anything but an impersonal insect. Teale’s relationship with Dinah grew from his close observations of her, and this caring relationship sets a precedent by which Bonta may show personal caring for the wildlife she observes without incurring rebuke from the more traditional parts of the literary community.

Although Marcia Bonta’s *Appalachian Autumn* definitely belongs in the phenological records genre, this book has something that few of the others in the genre have to quite the same level. What Marcia Bonta has inserted into her writing that is so valuable is her instruction on phenological study for her readers. In the narrative of *Appalachian Autumn*, Bonta describes how she is able to perform so many phenological studies of diverse natural subjects, and in this description she serves as a model that readers may copy in order to perform their own phenological studies. Bonta instructs readers, through her writing, on where to walk in the woods for the best views of wildlife and plant life; how to walk quietly and slowly so as not to disturb wildlife; that sometimes one must sit or lay down to truly absorb all that nature has to offer; how to maintain personal quiet at all times; how to freeze to avoid being noticed by wildlife; and how to communicate with wildlife, as through “pishing” to attract songbirds or clucking

to appease scolding squirrels. As noted in this list of actions, quiet is something that Bonta prizes as part of the natural world and her existence within it:

there is no more silence on earth, and few people seem to notice. In fact, most are uncomfortable when faced with quiet. It means they must entertain themselves instead of being entertained – read, walk, think, contemplate. But these will soon be lost arts, overwhelmed by the allure of noisy technology (Bonta, 83).

Here Bonta expresses her sadness and frustration that the quiet, wild places of the world where nature lovers can find solitude are quickly shrinking. In *Appalachian Autumn*, even as she describes clear blue skies and beautiful autumn scenery, Bonta is reminded (and reminds the reader) of humanity encroaching on her wild places via the noise pollution of airplanes and highway traffic. *Appalachian Autumn*, like other books in the phenological records genre, is a call for humans to return to an understanding and appreciation of nature in all its grandeur. In the entry from September 26, Bonta relates a story about a Christian radio broadcast that both espoused the idea of deep appreciation for nature while at the same time denying the science of nature that can be proven with simple phenological observation. Bonta shows her frustration for this contradictory attitude: “The more we learn about how the natural world works, the more we should be filled with wonder and praise. The knowledge that our green earth is a mere pinprick in the vastness of the universe and we a mere blink of the eye in geological time should make us humble” (Bonta, 50). She shows readers time and again in her book that the natural world is a wondrous place, not to be glossed over, ignored, or simplified. Bonta seems to feel small in this statement, and yet in her everyday phenological observations she inserts herself so completely into the landscape that she seems to become a part of it, and to revel in her belonging to the wider world:

So I sat this glorious day among the asters at the edge of the Far Field, listening to calling crows and basking in the sunlight. It seemed, at the time, the most wonderful activity I could engage in. No wonder wild animals and domestic ones too, spend so much of their time similarly engaged while we humans continue to lay up treasures for ourselves on earth, taking heed of the morrow instead of appreciating the moment at hand” (Bonta, 49).

Regardless of how many other useful phenological observation skills Bonta demonstrates for her readers, this passage displays the most important: simple enjoyment. She interacts

with nature because, on some level deep inside herself, she feels whole and satisfied when she is in nature. Not only that, but Bonta wishes this fulfillment through nature for all people, and encourages her readers to seek out the enjoyable possibilities of phenological observation.

But the question recurs, even against Bonta's boundless enthusiasm: why study phenology? Bonta's narrative answers this question with gusto. *Appalachian Autumn*, although primarily a focused study of autumnal phenology, addresses the human-nature interaction in great detail. A good portion of the human-nature scenarios Bonta depicts are overwhelmingly positive, such as Teale's relationship to Dinah the praying mantis or Professor Barron's mycological discoveries. In the entry for December 4, Bonta examines the history of the relationship between humans and wasps, and discovers that humans who studied the life cycles and habits of wasps learned how to make paper from wood pulp just like wasps do when building their nests. This anecdote is evidence for the utility of even the simplest-seeming phenological studies. An even greater testament to the value of phenological study is shown in the entry for November 28. In this entry Bonta introduces her participation in Citizen Science projects to readers, namely the Thanksgiving Bird Count and the Christmas Bird Count. Citizen Science projects like these and others, such as the Monarch Count or Project Feeder Watch, encourage people to engage with the environment via a hands-on approach. Bonta describes how counting birds, a simple phenological study, helps environmentally-focused groups like the Audubon Society keep track of bird populations and watch for problems in the ecosystem based on these numbers. Through citizen science, people participate in a reciprocal relationship with the environment: participation helps protect and advocate for the environment, while at the same time providing for participants all of the personal benefits of phenological observation.

Unfortunately, in *Appalachian Autumn* Marcia Bonta must also show us the non-symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. Although not a strict requirement for membership in the phenological records genre, *Appalachian Autumn* contains a theme common through many of the entries that becomes a plot for the journal. This common theme is the harm that humans can do to the environment when all they care to see is its

utility and disposability. Bonta cautions against this view of the environment: “As usual, the more we learn about the intricate ways of the natural world, the more we realize how much more there is to know. Sadly, with the rapid global destruction of natural habitat, we will never have the chance to learn all that we should” (Bonta, 42). This passage echoes back to Bonta’s sense of wonder at the grandeur of the Earth – she tells us that all people need to acquire this understanding and appreciation through personal study if we want to protect the world we live in so that it is a healthy home. Bonta also mourns the things lost through blindness, like extinct species about which we will never fully learn. Although extinction seems an archaic phenomenon, one relegated to the age of the dinosaurs and the dodo bird, Bonta reminds us through her mention of the DDT disaster in her September 18 entry that extinction is still a very real threat for seemingly hardy species like birds of prey. However, the real plot of *Appalachian Autumn* exists due to the activities of Bonta’s new neighbor, a lumberman, and his hired forester. The lumberman purchased the land adjacent to Bonta’s property during the writing of *Appalachian Autumn* after the death of the previous owner. This man, who had no ties to the piece of land and no appreciation for its wildness, saw only its utility as a harvestable lumber crop. Bonta relates a discussion between her husband and the lumberman’s forester:

When the talk turned to environmental subjects, [the forester] maintained that our society produces too much trash, consumes too much, and does not live lightly enough on the land. But he seemed unable to make any connections between his work and possible harm to the wildlife he admires and the environmental values he espouses. Like many people, I suppose he thinks there is plenty more where that comes from, an unending cornucopia of natural products for him to take with no thought of the morrow (Bonta, 108).

The lumberman and the forester have no emotional ties to the land – they have not walked the trails, sat resting their backs against the trees, or laid in the weeds and watched wildlife. Because Bonta has done these things, she owns the land in a more real way than does the lumberman. Unfortunately, the lumberman owns the land according to human standards, and so is free to clear cut it, as he does, removing practically every piece of living plant material on the property. This careless practice leaves the land open to destructive forces like erosion and wildfires, but the lumberman does not care as long as he gets his harvest from the land. Of course, readers would not encounter this story if it

did not deeply concern Bonta. She cares for the land and knows that the lumberman could have behaved differently, while still harvesting the lumber from his property. In the entry for November 20 Bonta describes sustainable harvesting options for logging timber sales – following any of these procedures would protect the land while allowing the lumberman to make a profit. Sadly for Bonta and readers, who are drawn through Bonta’s powerful language to also care deeply for Plummer’s Hollow, the clear cut is executed and the land laid to waste. Bonta saves her laments for the land from sounding redundant and completely morose by supporting her complaints with more expert evidence. She refers to soil conservationists, other foresters, and other naturalists to reinforce the position that simply raping the land for its resources is destructive not only for nature, but for human society as well. By the end of *Appalachian Autumn*, the lesson posed by the actions of the lumberman forces Bonta to leave readers with a sobering message still entrenched in her strong phenology:

Like the seven does I found bedded down below our house early in the afternoon, seemingly unaware of hunting season, most people seem unaware of how dangerously close we are coming to irreparably damaging our life support system. The does are not connecting gunshots to their own possible demise; we are not connecting the earth’s warning signals to our own possible extinction (Bonta, 207-208).

## CONCLUSION

Even after such a thorough exploration and defense of the phenological records genre, questions and problems still remain. A single thesis cannot change the attitudes and behaviors of literary critics or wider society. I have initiated the discussion, but the wider literary community must adopt the terminology of phenology and acknowledge the utility of the phenological records genre before the genre can achieve its full efficacy. But even after this new genre is recognized and appreciated, there will still be work to do.

The real change must be an overhaul of how humans relate to the environment, as

Lawrence Buell observes:

Regional terrain organizes itself for us in the guise of maps and highways; rarely do we bring its topography, system of watercourses, vegetation zones, and atmospheric patterns into focus as organizing forces when we drive rapidly through them on our daily commute. Insulated to such a degree from their direct influence, we do not feel them constituting us (Buell, 108).

We are still separated from nature by so much of the basic structure of our lives. As this passage mentions, most people traverse nature in some way every day, but cars, computers, phones, and TVs separate us from the environment surrounding us. Since even books can separate people from nature, this becomes a limitation for the phenological records genre. However, as I previously explained, the disconnect between humans and nature has grown so severe that we must rely on a medium like literature to enact a gradual reconnection. Books in the phenological records genre offer the best avenue toward reconnection, as authors like Aldo Leopold and Marcia Bonta provide well-structured concrete examples readers can imitate in order to experience phenology first-hand. Buell advocates for this return:

Even if we have studied regional ecology, our daily routines may keep it from percolating through to the level of ordinary perception. The challenge, for those interested in assuming it, thus becomes to a considerable extent ‘rehabitation’; refamiliarizing ourselves with the physical environment that our preindustrial forebears perforce had to know better experientially, that their aboriginal forebears knew better than they. One way to answer this challenge is to sink one’s roots more deeply in place (Buell, 108).

Bonta demonstrates a “reinhabitation” of nature through her extensive walks including sitting or laying down in order to fully immerse herself in the landscape. Practices like these are important for readers of the phenological records genre to learn so that they can adopt their own “refamiliarizing” process and heal the rift between humans and nature. Notice that Buell hearkens back to sense of place in this passage as well. He implies through terminology like “aboriginal” and “sink one’s roots” that a reconnect to nature would be a homecoming for humanity, a return to our natural state. Authors in the phenological records genre have already achieved, at least in part, this homecoming and are able, through their striking language describing their astute phenological observations, to translate the homecoming process for the rest of us. Phenology has many utilities, but the most important for the people of our age is as a tool to facilitate the human reconnect to nature.

For people who wish to experience the wider diversity of works in the phenological records genre, other authors belonging to the genre include (but are of course are not limited to): Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Susan Fenimore Cooper, Henry Beston, Ned Smith, and Edwin Way Teale. Each of these authors presents unique perspectives on their own chosen places through careful phenological observation. And of course, after learning from the writing of one or more of these outstanding phenological role models, readers should emulate these authors and their reconnections with nature in order to add momentum to the newest green movement and shape the human return to nature.

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