



Artist Catie Michel with her completed 2025 Nature Notes mural on the Sand Creek Art Walk

Creating this mural with the Sand Creek Regional Greenway community has been a true honor! As soon as I read the open call for proposals celebrating the Greenway’s restoration history and ecological transformation, I knew I wanted to highlight not just the organisms found along the trail, but how the Partnership supports them, and how trail visitors might encounter them. As a naturalist, keeping field notebooks is integral to my work. Slowing down to closely observe and record surroundings is such an enjoyable way to experience the world.

With this mural, I wanted to expand a typically individual practice to a communal scale that invites accessibility and engagement. Notebooks, a universal learning tool, felt like a splendid visual framework through which to reflect both scientific exploration and the everyday experiences of trail visitors. Additional tools of observation are sprinkled throughout (hand loupe, magnifying glass, beaker, pencil, binoculars), acknowledging our presence and interactions with the more-than-human world without centering humans visually.

Each field notebook spotlights a distinct ecological theme: *Plants and Pollinators*, *Aquatic Habitats*, *Reptiles and Amphibians*, *Mammals*, and *Birds*. These were inspired by the Partnership's community science efforts and by my own visits to the trail. Organisms throughout each spread are depicted in grey line drawings, solid colors with outlines, and fully-rendered paintings, reflecting the various in-progress stages of sketching in a notebook. One detail I love: the grey paint used for the line drawings and for the lead in the pencil is actually called "Pencil Point." (I used Behr and Benjamin Moore exterior latex paints).

Plants and Pollinators reflects the Partnership's Pollinator Garden, Butterfly Monitoring, Insect ID, and plant restoration initiatives. During my walks, I encountered clusters of prairie roses and flutters of checkered whites. *Aquatic Habitats* depicts a water sample with macroinvertebrates and other creek species inspired by the Partnership's water quality monitoring, USGS streamflow data, and long-term creek restoration: many of these species indicate ecological recovery.

Reptiles and Amphibians features several species from the City of Aurora's Wildlife Checklist, including the Colorado State Amphibian: the Tiger Salamander! The Partnership's Wildlife Detectives youth program, during which kiddos identify wildlife signs like scat and tracks, inspired the *Mammals* spread. I personally saw so many raccoon tracks that I had to feature one. On one of my final painting days, I even saw an American Mink (my first ever!!).

The final spread celebrates the Greenway's diverse bird species and the Partnership's frequent bird walks. Red-tailed hawks soared over the wall nearly every day while I worked, and vocal red-winged blackbirds were abundant. Every species in this mural (38 total!) can be found along the trail, and I hope visitors enjoy looking for them.

I want to express my utmost gratitude to everyone who voted for this design. Reading and incorporating comments was incredibly humbling and valuable; a favorite request was to add a Colorado Columbine because they once grew abundantly along the trail. To me, these kinds of anecdotes are foundational to creating public works that earnestly engage with community. The knowledge shared by voters shaped this project just as much as the ecological research did. Not only do our individual relationships to the surrounding flora and fauna matter, but so do our connections to

each other: how we find mutual meaning and care through our shared affections for water, willows, warblers; cottonwoods, cattails, columbines.

Thank you to the Sand Creek Regional Greenway Partnership team, to the voting community members, to the selection committee, to the attendees and vendors of the mural festival, to the many trail-users-turned-friends, to Scotty for their assistance, to Amelia, Jude, and Leo for documentation, and to all the beautiful beings who reside and recreate along this special stretch of living land!

- Catie Michel