

# Bird Woman: Whole Terrain interviews Julie Zickefoose

April 18, 2012 | Filed under: [Environmental Art](#), [Environmental Writing](#), [Profiles](#) and tagged with: [environmental art](#)

Update: Julie's essay, "Where the Rose Gentian Grows," appears in *Whole Terrain's* new volume, 'Boundaries.' *Whole Terrain* is available for purchase online at [Writing Nature Marketplace](#). Our original interview with Julie is reposted below.

By **Hanna Wheeler**



Julie Zickefoose is one of the lucky few who are gutsy enough to make a living— and a difference— by doing something they love.

She spends most of each day walking, observing, sketching and painting the inhabitants of 80-acre nature sanctuary in the Appalachian foothills of southeast Ohio. Her glowing watercolors and personal essays reflect careful attention and joy.



"You can reach a lot of people through writing and art," she said. "The world is made up of so many moving parts. If I can give somebody a deeper connection to what they're seeing outside the window, that's a good day's work."

Julie always knew she wanted to be an illustrator and wanted to work in conservation. What she didn't know was how to combine the two. After working for a non-profit for a number of years, she decided to quit and give it a go as a freelance artist.

"I realized that if I was going to starve, I might as well starve on my own rather than letting some nonprofit starve me," she said. "I house-sat for people. I moved 10 times in one year. I lived very simply and pursued the study of nature. I'm so glad that I did that instead of saying, 'I need to rent an apartment and get a car.'"

Now, she is the author of *Enjoying Bluebirds More, Natural Gardening for Birds* and a collection of paintings and essays titled, *Letters from Eden: A Year at Home in the Woods*. She is the illustrator of *Restoring North America's Birds: Lessons from Landscape Ecology* and she served as a primary illustrator of the 17-volume work, *The Birds of North America*.

Julie travels around the country giving lectures on birding, painting and writing. She has a regular [column](#) in *Bird Watchers Digest* and her [commentary](#) airs on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*.

Julie attributes her narrative gift to her father. "Listening to him, I figured out how to construct a story," she said.

Her father also instilled in her a love of nature. The youngest of five, Julie spent her childhood following him around the yard. "My dad grew up on a farm in Iowa. He was a real outdoors guy and great gardener," she said.

Julie taught herself to be an artist. She was always sketching as a child. While attending Harvard for biological anthropology, she took some drawing classes. But her painting, she said, is still a "work in progress."

"Most of what I know comes from taking books out of the library. I look at what other people do. Surprisingly enough, it's a pretty good way to learn," she said.

Julie is both poetic and scientific. During the interview, she described her home as "the ruffled part of Ohio," but then switched to scientific mode, saying, "The forest is overwhelmingly oak and hickory with very little native evergreen." Then, back to poetry, with, "This time of year is an unrelieved gray."

When she first moved to Ohio from coastal Connecticut, she wasn't sure she would like it. But when she saw Ohio's wildflowers, she realized she could stay. "I enjoy living in a place that people don't normally give any thought to. I like living in a place that has all these incredible natural wonders. That's really all I need," she said.

In the upcoming "[Boundaries](#)" issue of *Whole Terrain*, Julie writes about a rare Ohio wildflower and finding common ground with her Appalachian neighbors.

"It's taken me time to fit into this community and carve out a place in it," she said. Now, her neighbors come to the local tavern to see her play with her band, and compliment her on her radio and blog pieces. "There's a lady down the holler who reads my blog on dial-up. She does dishes and laundry while it downloads. I have more readers in Ohio than in any state in the nation. I like that," said Julie.

Julie especially appreciates her avian neighbors. "They're my TV. They're incredible birds and we're so blessed to have them," she said.

Julie urges nature enthusiasts to get to know birds as individuals. "It's the same birds every year. I know which bluebirds lay white eggs, which are aggressive, which are passive. I know when one of the birds I know well goes missing and is replaced by another individual. Get out and work with them enough to get a feeling for their individual behaviors," she said.

Julie has studied the consciousness of birds almost her whole life with sometimes comical and sometimes touching results.

She described once hanging an umbrella beneath a barn swallow nest in her garage to save them from a landlord fed up with bird droppings on his car. Hating the umbrella, the birds dive-bombed Julie each time she walked through the garage. But one day, Julie saw a five-foot black rat snake sliding across the rafters towards the baby birds. Climbing a ladder, she plucked the writhing snake from the rafter with a stick, lowered it into a pillowcase and took it away. "I think I invented a new phobia," she joked. "Ophidostepnophobia. It's the fear of being up on a ladder with a snake over your head." The barn swallows were completely silent the whole time, and they never attacked her again. "There's so much more going on in the minds of birds than anyone realizes," Julie concluded.

This anecdote and others will be in Julie's upcoming book due out in the spring of 2012. The book, which Julie describes as an "illuminated memoir," focuses on different birds that have come into her life. Its working title is *Bird Woman* and the publisher is [Houghton Mifflin](#).

Julie's enthusiasm for birds and the natural world is infectious. And her story inspires us all to pursue what we love. "I think people are of most use to society when they do what they're best at," she said. "It's a disservice to yourself not to do that."

***[Julie Zickefoose](#) is a widely published natural history writer and artist. Educated at Harvard University in biology and art, she worked for six years as a field biologist for The Nature Conservancy before turning to a freelance art career. Her observations on the natural history and behavior of birds stem from more than three decades of experience in the field.***