

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

If you enjoy being outdoors, wish you knew more about the plants and animals you see or wish you could share what you know about nature, you should be on iNaturalist. It's a cross between Facebook for nature lovers and Pokémon Go! You "capture" one species in a photo or audio recording, and share it online. Citizen science projects like iNaturalist actually help protect the environment by giving huge amounts of data to scientists across many different fields, allowing humanity to be more aware of species, biodiversity and population distributions.

I recently attended an iNaturalist training led by Sim Barrow of the NWA Land Trust on Kessler Mountain, where our group learned all about how to use it. iNaturalist is free and easy to use. Just record what you observe, connect with others to identify it, and learn from each other about nature. As both a website and an app for Android and iOS phones, it accommodates many users. iNaturalist describes itself as a social network, and it's true: naturalists all over the world can follow each other to see one another's observations and help identify the species or learn from someone else's identification. Don't think you're a naturalist? You might be surprised! "From hikers to hunters, birders to beach-combers, the world is filled with naturalists, and many of us record what we find. What if all those observations could be shared online?" explains iNaturalist.org. It all started as a 2008 Master's thesis project by Nate Agrin, Jessica Kline, and Ken-ichi Ueda at UC Berkeley. Acquired by the California Academy of Sciences in 2014, there are now over eight million observations recorded from every country in the world!

One of the reasons iNaturalist is so special is that we're all limited in the amount of time we have to research something we discover, and nobody's an expert in everything. Networking with a world of naturalists helps identify species far faster than we could ever achieve alone. At the state level, projects like Arkansas Monarch Mapping Project and Herps of Arkansas are listed on iNaturalist so that our monarch, reptile and amphibian observations can be used to support maintaining these species in our state. Local projects, like the ones listed through Biodiversity of NWA Land Trust Preserves, help our region keep track of all the species living here.

In order to be considered "research grade," an observation must be identified by others and receive a two-thirds consensus from identifiers. You can upload photos from a camera to the website, or use a phone camera that automatically creates a record when you're using the app. A location and approximate time of a sighting are necessary to provide context. Rare sightings can be kept hidden from the general public. Copyrights can be protected on photos, if desired.

Visit [iNaturalist.org](https://www.inaturalist.org) to sign up or use a Facebook account to log in. Download the app if you intend to use your phone, which makes capturing species in the field faster and easier. If you're in an area without internet connection, just finish creating a record once you're online again. Help increase our collective consciousness in a more literal sense, using the science of iNaturalist to protect our planet and discover more about nature!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.