The Beings of Cascadia—well, 128 of them—are brought to life in a new field guide that is probably unlike any such book you’ve held. "Cascadia Field Guide," just out from Mountaineers Books, focuses the view of our region through the lenses of art, ecology and poetry.

Each Being (using that term instead of “species,” and honoring each with capitalization, hint at the book’s singular approach) is provided a description, and then a creative musing—mostly in poetry—which conjures it into art.

These short pieces are grouped into stand-alone chapters on each of 13 regional ecosystems where we visit or live: Tidewater Glacier, Muskeg, Salish Sea, Coastal Urban Woods, Temperate Rainforest, Urban Shore, Pine Forest, Eastern Rivers, Shrub-Steppe, Montane, Loowit-Mount St. Helens, Willamette Valley and Outer Coast. Though each is afforded a compact snapshot, the overall effect is a tapestry.

Browsing the book is a bit like hiking with a naturalist, when you’re near enough to hear commentary on nature’s secrets studied into memory by someone who has really been paying attention, looking closely, and caring deeply. What you’ll learn in this book will provide entertaining discussion for your own walks with friends.

Unusual analogies also abound. Look up and marvel that, the editors tell us, a single Western Redcedar "can make a canoe sixty feet long (about the length of a bowling lane)." And in the accompanying poem by B.C. writer Bren Simmers, what are left behind from these Beings of the Coastal Urban Woods, are “notched stumps the size of hot tubs.”
Pause and glance down at Lungwort lichen: “seafoam green on top and ivory underneath with distinctive melon-colored bumps and a netted texture of ridges.” This Being of the Temperate Rainforest has “palm-sized leaves” and a “leathery, almost spongy” surface. I will remember and say its name. And I now know that it is sensitive to air pollution, and so is losing its habitat. “If you find yourself standing near Lungwort, breathe deep,” coaches the book. “This is good, clean air.”

Do you read poetry? The book offers an essential, accessible reason for it: connection to nature. The poems feel more readily gleaned due to each Being’s introductory prose and art; all elements work together into, you could say, a communications ecosystem.

You will read wonderful poets—well-known folks like Colleen J. McElroy and Theodore Roethke, and newer stars like Rena Priest and Claudia Castro-Luna. But pay attention, too, to others that you do not know, whose poems are like rays of light through deep woods.

The stories, lore and language of Cascadia’s indigenous people are plentiful in this book, as it honors the places of the First Peoples, who know this world on a deeper level than any who’ve come after. You will learn Native names for the plants and animals, along with their common and taxonomic names, and it feels as though each designation is equally important—although there is only one of the three that most of us will ever use. Knowing, and naming, the Beings from all perspectives seems essential.

The book’s Humans tackle towering subjects, like the Alpine Larch—called “this golden candle flame of a tree” by the book’s editors. One of them, poet C. Marie Fuhrman, brings this larch to life in a poem inspired by the words of Chief Seattle. Her piece embodies the book’s unique approach: encouraging a different look at nature, embracing Native lore, and considering our culture.

**PROPHECY**

_The White Man will never be alone._
_Let him be just and deal kindly with my people,_
_For the dead are not powerless_  
—Chief Seattle

_Coyote knows what she is doing._
_Transmigrating souls_  
_of the real people_  
_into Larch. You must know too,_
_because every autumn_  
_Larch celebrate their abundance_  
_with potlatch_  
_And give away their summer gold._
_When you see_  
_the bare limbs and spine_  
_you will also see the real people,_
_to which Coyote taught_  
_that survival comes_  
_in shades of brown._

After pondering that, take a closer look at Copepod, a tiny crustacean, a zooplankton, that lives in the Urban Shore ecosystem. Consider this excerpt from the poem “Dear Copepod” by Spokanite Kathryn Smith:

_My tears make the shape_  
_of your body. Could you live there, in my salt?_  
_Already, you feed on what I shed—_  
_microplastics, exhaled carbon. You know the_  
_carelessness of my kind. I’m sorry. I thought_  
_maybe you could teach me how to cope..._  

Already, my “Cascadia Field Guide” is getting Deer-eared. The cover’s French flaps bulge a bit from being used as bookmarks, the front one pushing the cover open, inviting me to browse. The other day a few pages became stuck together from the tears of a Douglas-Fir that cascaded onto the page when a gust of Wind blew Rain through its branches. And now I find myself capitalizing Wind and Rain. 🌬️

**Bill Thorness** is a Seattle-based author, editor and freelance writer. His books include “Cool Season Gardener,” “Edible Heirlooms,” and “Biking Puget Sound.” He writes for many regional publications, including “The Seattle Times”. Learn more at billthorness.com.