

The Merry Leaflet

Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College | P.O. Box 263, Wolf Lake, IN 46796 | 260.799.5869 | merrylea@goshen.edu | goshen.edu/merrylea

Inspired Winter Reflections: Graduate Student Newsletter Takeover Edition

WELCOME TO A SPECIAL EDITION of The Merry Leaflet!

We have turned over this newsletter issue to the students in our [Master of Arts in Environmental Education \(MAEE\) program](#) to not only further their environmental writing skills, but to give our readers a chance to get to know these students better.

The graduate cohort has spent significant time this winter intentionally connecting with the seasonal landscape of Merry Lea by tromping through knee-high snow, following animal tracks, searching for owls and sliding around on frozen wetlands.

In early February, they shared their excitement for all things cold and snowy with preschoolers, first graders and fifth graders as they led and taught our [winter field trip program, Winter Nature](#). This experience gave the graduate students a chance to practice delivering winter-themed environmental education lessons and added a few new pedagogical approaches to their toolbelts, such as puppetry and making plaster casts of animal tracks.

Matt, Kylie, Bella, Breanna and Anna, our five graduate students, are excited to share some of their hibernal adventures with you in the following articles.

After all their hard work and learning over the past seven months in northeast Indiana, the MAEE students are now spending the next few weeks enjoying the warmth of Arizona during their intercultural environmental education class.

In this course, they are learning about southwestern ecosystems and sharing this newly acquired knowledge with local students from San Simon School, Apache Elementary School and the Peace Academic Center (formerly Hopi Mission School). Watch for updates on our Facebook and Instagram pages and in a future edition of [The Merry Leaflet](#).

In the meantime, we hope that you are inspired by these graduate students' reflections to bundle up, head outside and embrace what remains of the winter season. ☀

DR. JASON MARTIN,
Merry Lea Executive Director



ABOUT MERRY LEA	TEAM MEMBERS		BOARD MEMBERS	
<p>Merry Lea was created with the assistance of The Nature Conservancy and through the generosity of Lee A. and Mary Jane Rieth. It is operated by Goshen College. The center provides a comprehensive program of environmental education and recreation.</p> <p>The Merry Leaflet, published in spring, summer, fall and winter, provides news about programs and developments at Merry Lea. Elena Fischer is its editor and the author of articles without bylines. See goshen.edu/merrylea/news for more updates.</p>	<p>Rian Bylsma Environmental Educator</p> <p>Kaeli Evans Farm Manager</p> <p>Elena Fischer Communications Specialist</p> <p>Kerry Goodrich Property Supervisor</p> <p>Carol Good-Elliott Environmental Educator</p> <p>Tom Hartzell Coordinator of Undergraduate Programs</p> <p>Jason Martin Executive Director</p>	<p>Bill Minter Director of Land Management</p> <p>John Mischler Director of Agroecology</p> <p>Ruth Mischler Assistant Professor, SEED</p> <p>Joel Pontius Director of Sustainability Leadership Semester</p> <p>Jonathon Schramm Associate Professor, SEED</p> <p>Jennifer Schrock Leader of MCCN</p>	<p>Kaitlyn Sproles Environmental Education Outreach Coordinator</p> <p>Alan Stadler Building Maintenance and Grounds Assistant</p> <p>Marcos Stoltzfus Director of Environmental Education Outreach / Assistant Executive Director</p> <p>Maria Tice Administrative Assistant / Volunteer Coordinator</p>	<p>Melissa Kinsey, Chair</p> <p>Andy Rieth, Vice Chair</p> <p>Reena Ramos</p> <p>Ryan Sengenig</p> <p>Jerry Sweeten</p> <p>Ex Officio: Ann Vendrely</p> <p>Ex Officio: Jason Martin</p>

Following in the Footsteps of Deer

WRITTEN BY
MATTHEW DAVIDSON

Bristol, Tenn.

B.A. History and English Literature,
University of North Carolina Greensboro,
2021

IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN, BUT THERE IS something about snow that draws out the child in all of us.

For one winter-based field trip, I departed with a group of six first graders from the Learning Center at Merry Lea to discover whatever might be out there waiting for us.

Even as an educator, it takes more restraint than I expected to not immediately fall to the ground and make a snow angel.

It was the second day of three Winter Nature programs spread across a week in February. Winter Nature is a field trip offered at Merry Lea where students explore how people, plants, and animals cope with winter by using their senses in the wintery woods and prairie.

A fresh dusting of snow sparkled blindingly under a bright sun and a blue sky. And already, as I listened to the calls of cardinals nearby, I knew it would be an exciting day of programming.

We made it about 15 feet from the Learning Center before a snowball flew over my left shoulder from somewhere behind me. Turning around, I was unsurprised to find four students with snowballs in their hands, who were now frozen under the gaze of a relatively new and unknown adult.

When it comes to programming at Merry Lea, having fun is rarely discouraged, especially in my trail groups. Education is important, but education involves ensuring that every student who visits Merry Lea leaves with a positive experience in the natural world.



First graders in Matthew's trail group play tug-of-war with a fallen vine in the snow.

Wasting no time, I bent down to make a snowball.

I didn't want to be caught empty handed! Plus, modeling positive behavior is an important part of being an environmental educator.

Finally able to let my inner child out with two snowballs in hand, I threw them at the two students closest to me. Smiles spread across faces, accompanied by giggles, laughter and flying snowballs. It wasn't a fair fight, but it was a fun fight.

After only a minute of snowballs being thrown at each other, the students quickly learned a simple lesson: strength in numbers, and ganged up on me. It was my turn to smile and laugh now.

"Alright, alright! I surrender! I surrender!" I said. "Let's take a breather for a second."

Feeling the warmth of the sun on our faces, I and a few others munched on our remaining snowballs for refreshment.

The purpose of the Winter Nature field trip is to demonstrate that despite how it might look, there is still lots going on in the winter time.

Deer, having to search harder for food, are more active in the winter months. Squirrels scurry up and down trees to find food they stored since autumn. Woodpeckers hide their food under the bark of trees, flying and calling through the canopy. Foxes, coyotes, hawks and owls watch and wait for easy prey, conserving energy in biding their time.

Even if you can't see these animals, winter reveals the lives and habits of these creatures in a deeply intimate way: a fact that these first graders were about to learn.

"Everybody ready to keep going?" I asked. Smiles and excitement erupted from the trail group.

"Good to hear!" I said. "I say we keep heading down this path. Who wants to lead?"

All hands went up. "Looks like we will have to take turns," I said.

After randomly picking one of the students to start us off, we went down the trail.

We had barely made it 20 more feet, still close enough to the Learning Center for a student to hit the building with a snowball, when we came across animal tracks.

The students were well prepared. We had spent all morning learning about tracks, how different animals walk and which animals are still active in winter.

Immediately, one of the students said, "I think these are deer tracks!"

"What does everyone else think?" I asked. "Are deer still active in winter?"

The response was unanimous. They were most definitely deer tracks.

"Let's follow them!" One of the students said. And we were off.

We didn't have to go far to experience wonder. As we followed those deer tracks into the woods, it was like we were transported to another world. We

As we followed those deer tracks into the woods, it was like we were transported to another world. We were all explorers. We were all students learning from the greatest teacher of all: Mother Nature.

were all explorers. We were all students learning from the greatest teacher of all: Mother Nature.

For most of the remaining trail exploration time, we followed in the footsteps of deer. As countless tracks weaved through the woods, we found

scat, gnawed branches and more than a dozen deer beds.

Just hours earlier in this spot, deer rested together and made “beds” or impressions in the snow where they laid down. Inspired by this, students made their own deer beds and learned about

different survival strategies, including where animals go and what they do in winter.

The paths of the deer led us to squirrel and rabbit tracks, to tunnels made by tiny mammals and groundhog holes. Each of these findings revealed some of the mysteries of how different creatures live in winter.

That’s the beauty of programming at Merry Lea. When education is rooted in experience rather than explanation, anything can be a teacher.

Even footprints in the snow. 

The Quest for Yellow Snow

WRITTEN BY
KYLIE PRESTON

Lenoir City, Tenn.

B.S. Biology, Maryville College, 2021

I WAS HONESTLY DREADING THE TIME that I was going to spend with my group of five fifth-graders as we went out to explore the trails at Merry Lea.

There was still some snow on the ground, but it was raining lightly, so we distributed ponchos to the students. I knew that the trails would be a slushy, slippery mess to walk through. And I was fully expecting that within the first five minutes of our walk, a student would let out the first complaint.

However, the reality that I created in my head was not at all what I experienced with this group of fifth graders.

The trails were quite slushy and slippery, but that didn’t deter this group of students. In fact, amid the slush, there was a long strip of slick ice that covered the trail. They immediately took advantage of the slippery ice and became penguins.

They ran toward the ice and lowered themselves onto their belly with their arms behind their back and legs slightly raised to slide on the ice.

This activity was dubbed, “penguinizing” by the fifth graders.

After we were done penguinizing, we started looking off-trail for tracks in the

snow that had not melted yet in the rain. We located a deer trail and the students were curious to see where it led.

We followed the tracks into the woods. I would have been worried about not being able to find our way back, if it weren’t for the five sets of fifth-grader footprints that followed wherever we went.

Eventually, we came to a spot where the deer had sat in the snow. I was using the deer bed as a learning opportunity to explain how the deer was sitting, when much to my surprise, I heard my group making various sounds of excitement and disgust. I looked over and saw that they were all gathered around a pool of yellow snow near the deer bed.

“This deer must have had a lot of liquids,” they said.

I never expected students to get so excited for yellow snow, but the experience sparked an expedition.

“Let’s look for more pee snow!” they exclaimed. And we did.

We followed multiple deer trails until we found that inevitable patch of golden snow. We eventually started keeping a tally of yellow snow sightings. Once we got to the eighth patch, we decided to take a break from our quest and walk back to the Council House for hot cocoa.

We hooted like barred owls as we retraced our steps. The words, “Who cooks for you, who cooks for you

all!” sung by five young learners, who thought they sounded like perfect owls, reverberated through the trees.

Just when my ears could take no more, we arrived at the Council House, an outdoor shelter with benches. My group told me, “We had so so sooo much fun today!”

As they drank their hot cocoa and listened to the story “Owl Moon,” I was more content than I had been with a group of learners in a long time.

I thought back to how wet and icky the weather was outside, and how I was so sure that my group was going to be miserable. I never thought that a search for yellow snow would keep a group entertained for 40 minutes, but I’m really glad that it did. 



Kylie enjoys the snow at the Farmstead.



After a warm but windy winter day, the ice on Kesling Wetland began to melt, and the wind blew the melted water around. When the temperatures dropped below freezing again, the result was these ice formations!

What About Winter?

**WRITTEN BY
BELLA SANTANA**

Chesterton, Ind.

*B.A. Environmental and Sustainability
Studies, Indiana University, 2019*

ALL SEASONS HAVE THEIR BEAUTY.

That individual allure that makes them easy to long for all year round.

In Spring; we are reminded of rebirth. Blooming buds intertwine with the reintroduction of warmth.

Always coming right when we think we can't possibly take another week of cold and gray. Pushing us to welcome life with open arms and gratitude.

In Summer; the lush beauty of this life is at its peak. Singing birds and buzzing dragonflies Chase each other and perform their sweet songs into the night.

A song that reminds us of our childhood, Of chasing lightning bugs and swatting away mosquitos Well past when the sun sets and the darkness envelops the world.

In Autumn; the colors of yellow, orange, and red Creep over the land, Dancing to become one with the previously green landscape, As we hear the trumpet calls of the sandhill cranes before we see Their grand entrance. We are reminded of the cold to come.

But what about winter?

The cold?

The wet?

The gray?

As the days grow shorter, and nights longer, We must remember our roots.

Remember that winter, like all seasons, is a time for change.

But it is also a time for rest.

A time to give ourselves grace And welcome the slow and steady pace of the quiet.

For we too are mammals, not separate from nature,

And we too, must either fight, flight, or freeze.

As the turtles, snakes, and frogs go deep under the ice and mud, Going into a state of dormancy until the warmth returns, We too must go deep. Welcoming in times of reflection and rest like we welcome that first snow as the twinkle of Christmas lights dance before our eyes.

As the wild geese disperse to Somewhere warmer and more hospitable, we too have a choice, Will we embrace the cold, or run from it? We can bring out our winter coats and snow pants Just as the coyotes and rabbits bring out their thick winter fur, Or we can escape to the warmer states as the birds and the butterflies do.

What will you do?

I know I choose to stay.

I stay with the deer, the squirrels, and the foxes. Following their tracks through the woods And leaning into the adventures of the unknown.

I stay with the barred owls,
and the black capped chickadees.
Longing to hear the tunes of
"Who-cooks-for-you?
Who-cooks-for-you-all?"
Intermixed with
"chicka-de-de-de-de-de-de-de"
As I stumble my way through the snow
covered forests.

I long for the days where the sky,
bright and blue,
Hangs above my hat covered head,
Shining light and kissing my face with
heat only the sun can provide.

Where a blanket of snow stretches
as far as the eye can see.

And the only sounds I can hear are
those of children laughing.
Winter is a time of rest,
Yes.

But it is also a time of exploration.
Where you never know what
exactly you might find or
Where those deer tracks
might take you.

It's a time where our inner child
is embraced with
Every snowball, snowman, and glide
over the ice that you experience.

Where I am transported back to my
front yard at 8 years old.
Shivering, red from the wind and wet,

But glowing from the joy
and laughter and
Knowing that hot chocolate and dog
cuddles await me inside.

Winter is about balance.
About learning when to turn off the
lights and lay down
And allow yourself the time you need to
recover before the Spring ahead.

But it's also about learning
when to get up.
To take out those snow boots.
Those ice skates.

It's about learning to open your door,
Step outside,
And let adventure lead you onward. 

Thank you for your support

Thank you for donating to Merry Lea this quarter. Your support has contributed to environmental programming, maintaining facilities and upkeeping hiking trails.

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Small Things but Big Impacts

WRITTEN BY
BREANNA WINFREY

Maywood, Ill.

B.S. Natural Resources and Environmental
Management, Ball State University, 2020

SOMETIMES BEING A PART OF something small isn't so bad! Don, a little Northern watersnake that lives here at Merry Lea, is a great example. Even though his habitat is a tank in the Learning Center, he is a big part of the learning that happens here.

Staff and graduate students enjoy studying his behavior and mannerisms just as much as they enjoy holding and interacting with him. We ponder ideas like, "What is he doing? Is he hunting? Is he about to start molting? Why is he wiggling like that?"

Not only are the graduate students and staff intrigued by Don, so are visitors! This small snake can fill a large chunk of time as people love to learn more about him, his habits and diet, and look at his scales. Observing Don during the winter brings a sense of liveliness when there is typically not much activity outside.

But perhaps most meaningful is how Don continuously grows in my heart, helping me gain confidence in working with animals.

During the recent winter field trips, I had the opportunity to become more familiar with Don. And I'll admit it was scary to pick him up on my own at first. Now, I'm able to hold him and let him curl around my hand to observe his nostrils, and the texture and patterns of his scales.

As we notice the small details and engage with Don, he teaches us that we can learn to love the smaller things in life — the things that often don't attract much attention. This inspires greater awareness of overlooked areas, like our own backyards!

Some people love to explore larger nature preserves, but tend to forget that

there are smaller ecosystems, habitats and observations to make in their own backyard.

My backyard at home is not as large as Merry Lea's 1,189 acres, but there are still tons of things to investigate.

When I was home for a weekend in February, my family and I engaged in a lot of risky play during our time together. Risky play involves activities where kids assess and test their physical limits — or appropriate levels of risk — during playtime in a non-hazardous way. This can look like climbing, sliding or using tools.

My cousins really enjoyed the patches of ice found here and there around the yard.

One day that weekend, my younger cousins and I were preparing to go play outside. The kids went out first while I was getting my baby cousin's outside gear on. Not even two minutes later, my cousins ran back in the house screaming, "There's a ramp! There's a ramp!"



Breanna holds Don at the Learning Center.

I was so confused until I saw that the leak from the gutter froze to make a small ramp that the kids could slide down.

We found some more ice in a storage container that was left outside. The ice was frozen solid, but my 10-year-old cousin Corey was invested in removing the ice. He found a broom, a shovel, a hammer and whatever else he could find to pry it.

... we can learn to love the smaller things in life — the things that often don't attract much attention.

After a few tries, the ice slid out and we were surprised by what we saw: a completely dirty block of ice! It was amazing to listen to their ideas of why it was so dirty. "What was trapped in the ice? Was it dirt, leaves, or some other organic matter?"

Corey hacked away at the ice with the hammer to try to figure it out.

Before Corey cracked the ice core to see what was inside, he gave the hammer to his five-year-old little brother to have the final blow! And we were all excited to see the cracked ice crumble into pieces and reveal dirt.

Studying and learning here at Merry Lea has connected me with nature in a way that allows me to see the beauty in my own backyard.

Sometimes the risk or fear of climbing a tree or encountering a raccoon or possum is intimidating, but I won't let it keep me from seeing the beauty in life.

Don helped me realize that animals are just as much part of this world as we are.

Seeing the small gesture of Corey passing the hammer to his younger brother made my heart smile. His action may have created a bigger impact than we realize.

Sometimes the smaller things in life provide that accessibility to curiosity and the ignition for admiration. 

A Fresh Perspective

WRITTEN BY
ANNA HUDSON

Syracuse, N.Y.

B.A. Spanish and Childhood Education,
Nazareth College, 2018

I HAVE LIVED IN SYRACUSE, N.Y.

my whole life. Syracuse is known for its brutal winters and heavy snowfall. In fact, the city in Upstate New York that receives the most snowfall each winter proudly accepts The Golden Snowball Award. Syracuse was the undefeated champion from the years 2002 to 2010 and again from 2012 to 2015.

I guess that's my strange brag to prove to you that I come from a place where winter is a big part of life. However, I must confess that I have never really liked the season.

When we were kids, my mom forced my brothers and I out the door to play every day, even in winter, to get fresh air (and probably to get out of her hair as well). I built snowmen, made snow forts for snowball fights and spent every wintery Saturday downhill skiing from the ages of five to thirteen.

But as I grew up and was no longer ordered to play outside, I pretty much ceased to go outdoors for leisure in the winter months. I started loathing the cold and snow and saw it as a miserable inconvenience.

I moved to Indiana in July to attend the Masters in Environmental Education program. As always, I enjoyed spending my free time outside hiking and exploring Merry Lea that summer and fall.

Then winter came. I prepared to settle into my grumpy, "I hate winter, and I'm going to stay inside until spring comes" attitude.

However, a few things have challenged me to change my perspective.

The first shift in perspective came from an assignment for our January class, Environmental Issues and History. We



Kylie walks across the frozen Kesling Wetland with patches of snow on top. The Rieth Village cottages are seen in the background.

had to choose a spot at Merry Lea to visit each day.

The goal of this assignment was to become intimately familiar with a location and have a space to reflect and meditate. Every day in January, I bundled up time and time again and became familiar with the routine of spending time outside, even in the snow and wind.

I realized that winter doesn't have to be a desolate white and brown landscape between the colors of fall and spring.

Sitting in my spot between two oak trees, I explored small details of wintery nature — details that I would typically miss. I noticed the vibrant colors of lichen growing on the oaks. I discovered acorn tops, discarded by squirrels high up in the trees, that froze to the solid ground, and I inspected the beautiful patterns of hundreds of tiny snowflakes that softly fell around me.

I realized that winter doesn't have to be a desolate white and brown landscape between the colors of fall and spring.

Experiencing Kesling Wetland also shifted my perspective. Even though I grew up in a place with cold winters, I never had exposure to a frozen pond. When ice formed on Kesling Wetland, professors started asking us if we had trekked on it yet. I was surprised; I assumed that it was too dangerous to go on a frozen pond.

However, we were assured that it had been cold enough for long enough, so I and the other graduate students ventured out onto the ice. We spent at least an hour each day sidling around on the ice together.

I rediscovered the joy of being silly and playing outside. I loved spending time on the ice so much that I bought a pair of used ice skates. For a few weeks I religiously went out at least once a day, sometimes twice, to skate.

I stopped skating after the snowstorm came through this past month. I wasn't feeling too motivated to clear snow off of the ice and I needed to prioritize time for school work.

But the novelty of goofing around with friends on a frozen pond was all I needed for a fresh perspective, realizing the bliss of spending time outside on a wintery day.

I have once again found a child-like joy in being outside in winter. ☺



Merry Lea

Environmental Learning Center
of Goshen College

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Events

Learn more at: goshen.edu/merrylea/events

BEESWAX WRAPS

WHERE: Farmstead

WHEN: Saturday, **March 19** | 9 – 10:30 a.m.

Join us for a hands-on workshop to create your very own beeswax cloth wrap. This handy addition to the kitchen provides an alternative to plastic wrap or single-use plastic bags.

Cost is \$20.

[Registration required on our website.](#)

TALES & TRAILS

WHERE: Various Sites

WHEN: **Last Tuesday** each month | 10 – 11:30 a.m.

Hear a tale and hike a trail with your preschooler to discover the natural wonders around you together! This monthly program is designed for children ages 3-5 and their caregiver(s), led by a Merry Lea educator.

Cost is free. Registration not required.

[See our website for more details.](#)

MERRY LEA ADVENTURE CHALLENGE: VERNAL LIBERATION

WHERE: Learning Center

WHEN: Saturday, **March 19** | 1:30 – 3:30 p.m.

The plants and animals of Merry Lea have worked hard to survive winter. Now they're getting ready for spring...but some need your help. Work as a team to solve puzzles and navigate the landscape to lead the Vernal Liberation!

Cost is \$3.50 per child & \$5 per adult.

[Registration required on our website.](#)

SPRING BREAK DAY CAMP

WHERE: Learning Center

WHEN: Monday, **April 4** - Friday, **April 8** | 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Looking for a way to keep your student entertained during spring break? Learners K-5th grade have the opportunity to explore the vast outdoors at Merry Lea where they will engage in outdoor fun and games!

Extended care is available for students in the morning and afternoon before and after the program each day.

Cost is \$30 per student. [Registration required on our website.](#)