

Winter 2012



The Merry Leaflet

Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College

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From Sea Turtles to Salmon:

More Stories About Merry Lea Graduates

This issue of the *Merry Leaflet* continues our two-part look at what has become of the students who hike Merry Lea's trails for a year, a summer or a semester and then move on.

The Merry Lea alums in this issue have gone on to create art shows and wrestle with climate change. They're learning about pine barrens, tracking birds and giving customers sharp-eyed advice about green building options. They've applied their love for the earth in a variety of ways and are teaching others to do the same.

Interestingly, three of the people we interviewed mentioned the same Merry Lea prairie as a favorite spot for three different reasons. It is a spot where most days, you can hike and see no one. Telling this handful of stories is a reminder that we share Merry Lea with an ever-widening web of invisible travelers: people who have drawn strength from this landscape and its human institutions in different ways.

Drew Weber, Ornithologist

Then: Serving as a Maple Scholar at Merry Lea during the summers of 2004 and 2005 stoked Drew Weber's interest in birds. Goshen College's Maple Scholars program enables undergraduates to gain research experience by assisting with professors' projects. In Weber's case, this meant rising before dawn to trek through swamps and briars in search of breeding birds.

Weber also assisted with Merry Lea's bird banding project. Chatting with his supervisor, Dr. David Miller, at the bird banding station when activity at the mist nets was slow helped Weber realize that jobs existed for people who enjoyed field research. "I attribute a lot of where I am now to those times," Weber says.

Now: Following graduation, Weber found a variety of jobs that kept him outdoors watching birds. He worked for the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas, counted hawks at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary near Kempton, Pa., and tracked Northern Saw-whet Owls from dawn to dusk for a study on their winter habits.

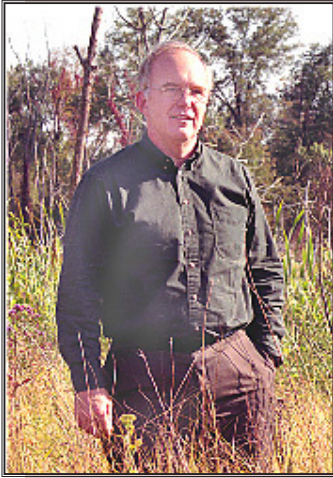
Currently, Weber is studying at Penn State University and working on a project that researches how agricultural practices are affecting grassland birds in Pennsylvania. He is also an elected member of the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee which reviews rare bird sightings in the state and maintains the official state list of birds.

As a sideline, Weber maintains a blog called Nemesis Bird where he and several colleagues chronicle their birding adventures (<http://www.nemesisbird.com>). The goal is to spark communication between birders and get them involved in citizen science projects. While the content of the blog focuses on Pennsylvania, any bird lover will enjoy the birding tips, reviews and outstanding photography that Weber provides.

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Above, Drew Weber holds an American Kestrel he has just banded east of State College, Pennsylvania.



Director's Desk Footprints of the Future

It is exciting to see the second set of stories about our Merry Lea alumni in this issue. The footprints that these persons left here at Merry Lea were gentle ones, but the experience here continues to be part of what directs their paths in the callings they are pursuing.

The stories make me hopeful. These people are change agents in the places where they work. They are bringing health and vitality to ecological communities in many places on the planet. Our alumni take a holistic approach

that includes people, plants, animals, abiotic factors, faith—and all the intersections between them.

The paths these alumni have taken give me inspiration for the Merry Lea vision—our emerging future. The Merry Lea team of staff, faculty, board and friends have thought and planned carefully about the ways that the Merry Lea mission can be achieved more fully. As a result, significant programs have been put in place that make possible many more footprints at Merry Lea. There will be many more alumni and more stories to share.

Think with me about the influence of the agroecology program. Students learn a set of skills and knowledge about sustainable agriculture that inspires them to put healthy food systems into practice. This is literally like planting a seed and anticipating a harvest. In this case, the harvest will be small farms, farmers' markets and community gardens in settings across the continent.

Our master's program in environmental education is creating annual opportunities for cohorts of seven to 12 students to be trained as professionals. In the past we could only have two or three education interns per year. This expanded pool means our reach is extending much more rapidly. Our graduates are engaged in changing how people understand natural history, environmental issues and care for the Earth. Quality environmental education will mark the footprints they leave behind.

We anticipate wonderful outcomes for the undergraduate students who will participate in the Sustainability Semester in Residence starting this fall. They will embark on a learning experience that is unique in its interdisciplinary approach, interactive pedagogy and attention to problem solving. Their footprints will be lighter as a result of the semester, but they will leave fully charged to make a difference in the world.

Our Merry Lea footprint of influence is also growing as we implement the Institute for Ecological Regeneration. We anticipate exploring the intersections between our landscape, environmental education, and faith underpinnings. The potentials are boundless—and are essential for today's world. May our footprints create traction and hope-filled change. §

Todd Weston, Park Ranger

Then:

Eagle Scout and reptile enthusiast Todd Weston came to Merry Lea in 2008 as a member of the first cohort of graduate students in environmental education. The program's fieldwork component helped him develop his zest for working with children of all ages. He remembers his time at the Yoder Sugar Bush—and the taste of pure maple sugar—with particular fondness. *continued next page*



Todd Weston, a 2009 graduate of Merry Lea's master's in environmental education program, sports a park ranger uniform while on duty at the Long Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex, New York.

Merry Lea, created with the assistance of The Nature Conservancy and through the generosity of Lee A. and Mary Jane Rieth, is operated by Goshen College. The Center provides a comprehensive program of environmental education and recreation.

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The *Merry Leaflet*, published in spring, summer, fall and winter, provides news about programs and developments at Merry Lea. Jennifer Halteman Schrock is its editor and the author of articles without bylines. Look online at www.goshen.edu/merrylea/latest for more news.

Now:

In August 2011, Weston landed his dream job as a park ranger for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at its Long Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "I think my time at Merry Lea was one of the reasons I got the job because I had the experience working with kids," Weston says.

Weston owes his job to a new emphasis on environmental education and interpretation on the part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. His duties are varied, but include delivering programs, developing curriculum and setting up a brand new visitors' center. While the Long Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex opened in 1947, this is the first time it has had a place to educate visitors.

**Debby Scott
Environmental Lawyer**

Then:

Debby Scott first came to Merry Lea as a Goshen College student engaged in Dr. Mary Linton's salamander research. Following graduation in 2001, she spent a year-long internship at Merry Lea researching green building design and funding options for the facility that became Rieth Village.

"While I was at Merry Lea, I realized that I was really interested in the interactions between human communities and their ecological communities," Scott says.

Now:

Following graduation from Lewis and Clark School of Law in Portland, Ore., Scott spent three years volunteering with Mennonite Central Committee in Kenya, where she worked with African farmers and advised an NGO on trade and agricultural policy. At the end her term, Scott didn't want to go back to working from a purely legal standpoint.

"I enjoyed the wider perspective of the policy advocacy world. I wanted to continue to explore the tensions



Above, Amy Thut helps a student into a pair of hip waders in preparation for a dip in the Elkhart River. Thut's freshman environmental science class performed water quality tests during this field trip to Baintertown Park south of Goshen.

between conserving the environment and development," she explains.

Currently, Scott is researching biofuels while pursuing a Ph.D. in geography at Rutgers University, Newark, N.J. She has learned that the values underlying the movement toward biofuels are very different, depending on whether you are in the U.S., in Europe or in Africa.

In December 2011, Scott attended the United Nations Framework Convention in Durban, South Africa. While parts of the gathering were discouraging, Scott was inspired by the groundswell of social movements getting involved in the climate change discussions and the wide array of communities whose voices were part of the process. "I am committed to not being cynical," she asserts.

Amy Thut, Biology Teacher

Then:

Amy Thut remembers a spring spent wandering Merry Lea's woodlands with Dr. Mary Linton in search of mosses, ferns and flowering plants. She saw her first liverwort

in a bog during that class on the plant kingdom. Another spring, she practiced teaching small groups of students during an environmental education internship with Dr. Dave Miller. In 2004, Thut returned for a yearlong environmental education internship and was able to experience the variety of Merry Lea's programs throughout the seasons. "I especially enjoyed teaching at the sugar bush, and staying up late tending the fire with Larry Yoder," she says.

Now:

Thut is now in her seventh year as a biology and environmental science teacher at Bethany Christian Schools, Goshen, Ind. "Merry Lea was a great step toward this job, as it provided experience teaching in the outdoors, and taught me the importance of experiential education," Thut says. Her environmental science students go on frequent field trips to the Elkhart River, to a farm, to the local wastewater treatment plant, to homes that conserve energy and to Merry Lea. They also have a pond on campus to study that Thut helped create.

"I am committed to not being cynical."

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Mallory Kuhn holds a baby Green Sea Turtle, *Chelonia mydas*. This is one of the animals she shared with the public while working as a zoo educator.

Mallory Kuhn, Zoo Educator Environmental Justice Recruitment Specialist

Then:

Mallory Kuhn joined Merry Lea's first cohort of master's in environmental education students in 2008-2009 in hopes of adding some education experience to her undergrad degree in wildlife and conservation biology. "The master's helped increase my knowledge of environmental issues and also taught me how to convey the importance of them to students," Kuhn says.

Now:

Kuhn has held two jobs since moving to Memphis, Tenn., after graduation. She first worked as an educator at the Memphis Zoo, using snakes, amphibians, raptors and small mammals to teach students about science and the importance of conservation. She even handled creepy crawlies like Madagascar hissing cockroaches.

In 2011, Kuhn was hired at BRIDGES, a non-profit organization that works to build a community of

leaders to advance racial, economic, educational, and environmental justice. BRIDGES has the first commercial green building in Memphis and opens its doors to give tours to the community. Kuhn is a recruitment specialist for Bridge Builders, a youth program for 7th-12th graders. She helps bring students together from all over the city to discuss justice issues that are important to them, and to focus on leadership development, diversity appreciation and community action.

"I really cherish my time spent at Merry Lea," Kuhn says. "I loved working outside with the students and developing my teaching style. I had so many great teachers who supported me throughout the program and still do today."

Jeremy Good Sustainable Farmer

Then: Jeremy Good spent three summers at Merry Lea during his time as an environmental science and biology major at Goshen College. In 2008, he took the Agroecology Summer Intensive and in 2009 and

2010, he was a Maple Scholar studying prairie grazing ecology under Dr. Ryan Sensenig.

"While my motives for being at Merry Lea were primarily academic, I kept coming back for more opportunities to spend time there because I loved the diverse landscape, the wildlife and the people that work and study there," Good says.

Now: After graduating from Goshen College in 2010, Good spent a year volunteering in Bolivia with Mennonite Central Committee's SALT program. He lived in a small town in the foothills of the Andes called Moro Moro. There, he worked with farmers on problems such as soil erosion and composting of human waste.

Since August 2011, Good has worked at Camphill Village Kimberton Hills: an intentional community that includes adults with special needs. He splits his time between a grass-fed biodynamic dairy farm and doing housework with special needs folks. Camphill Village also has a produce garden, orchard, herb garden, and bakery that provide food for the village as well as outside customers. The village has won various awards for its work on addressing environmental issues on a local scale.

Good says his time at Merry Lea encouraged him to live a more sustainable lifestyle. "My interest in sustainable agriculture was piqued during the agroecology summer intensive and it has grown into a passion that I plan to follow in one way or another for the rest of my life," he adds.

Shafkat Khan, Climate Change Researcher

Then:

Before he graduated from Goshen College in 2008, Shafkat Khan explored Merry Lea's landscapes during labs in Bill Minter's Forest Resources and Land Management courses. He also lived at Rieth Village one May term while studying ecology. Field experiences such as these

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MORE STORIES ABOUT MERRY LEA'S ALUMNI

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inspired him to learn more about ecosystems and how they function.

Now:

After graduation, Khan worked for an engineering company, testing water and soil at brownfield sites in Goshen, Ind. He was also a field technician addressing invasive species in city parks in the City of Ann Arbor, Mich.

Currently, Khan is pursuing a Ph.D. in ecology at the Odum School of Ecology at the University of Georgia, Athens, Ga. His research centers on climate change. He is studying changes in species composition in high elevation tropical forests in southwestern Costa Rica. Khan's research is not yet complete, but so far, it appears that higher elevation species will not be able to withstand the warmer, drier climates forecasted.

Khan is a native of Bangladesh, a low-lying agricultural nation likely to suffer some of the most severe effects from climate change and rising sea levels. §



Above, Shafkat Khan confers with a colleague, Jeisson Figueroa, at the field site in Costa Rica where he is studying climate change for his Ph.D in ecology. Photo by Fern Lehman.

K-12 Alumni Turn Up in Odd Places

The number of school children that have visited Merry Lea over the course of its 40-year history is certainly a six-digit figure. This multitude of short-term visitors is much harder to track than our graduate and undergraduate students are, but we do run into them occasionally.

- K to 12 Coordinator Paul Steury recalls a visit to a Dairy Queen where he received an enthusiastic greeting from the clerk. "I know you! You're the poop guy!" she chortled and then broke into a rendition of the Scat Rap, a song Steury uses with school groups.

What else do K to 12 visitors retain? Steury hopes that future graduate students will pursue this research topic.

- Recently, Merry Lea engaged Lightsky, a web design firm in Goshen to spruce up its web site. The fact that the proprietor had been to Merry Lea as a child and had some sense of the organization's purpose and identity helped to clinch the contract.

- March 2011 wasn't the first time Chelsea Ripke (left) and Karen Hoepfner (right) attended Merry Lea's sugaring program at the Yoder Sugar



Bush, Huntington, Ind. A generation ago, they came to the sugaring program as teacher and student. Hoepfner was Ripke's second grade teacher. Today, Ripke and Hoepfner are colleagues at Woodburn Lutheran School, Woodburn, Ind. The 2012 sugaring season is now underway. §

Merry Lea Alums Use Environmental Science in Nontraditional Ways

Levi Kropf, Builder

Then:

Levi Kropf graduated from Goshen College with an environmental science degree in 2006. Having grown up “with a hammer in his hand” in a family of builders, Kropf particularly appreciated his class in forest resources with Merry Lea’s Bill Minter. The course covered mills and logging operations as well as fieldwork in Merry Lea’s forests. Kropf is still grateful for this big picture perspective on the resources that go into building a home.

Rieth Village, Merry Lea’s platinum LEED® facility, was completed the year Kropf graduated. Kropf followed the construction process closely during this time and had several conversations with Luke Gascho about green building strategies. He was able to live in the brand new Rieth Village during his last May term.

Now:

After a period shocking fish and doing trout surveys in Idaho, Kropf moved to Portland, Ore., where he now has his own home remodeling business, Kropf Construction West.

Kropf describes Portland as a community where consumers are environmentally conscious and green

building has taken off—but so has “greenwashing.” He doesn’t care to brag about his environmentally responsible efforts, but he does what he can, separating materials for recycling, using low VOC products and pursuing green strategies as budgets allow. “Rieth Village was in hindsight a really good example for me to compare to other projects I’ve looked at,” Kropf says.

One month each year, Kropf nurtures his interest in wildlife biology by working on a commercial fishing

“Just because I don’t have a job as a biologist doesn’t mean I’m not using my degree.”

boat in Bristol Bay off the coast of Alaska during the world’s largest wild run of sockeye salmon. He is proud of the way this harvest is managed. Fishermen work in close proximity with biologists to make sure the harvest is sustainable, and the catch

is growing, despite having been fished commercially for over 100 years.

“Just because I don’t have a job as a biologist doesn’t mean I’m not using my degree,” Kropf observes.

Paula Dirks, Artist

Then:

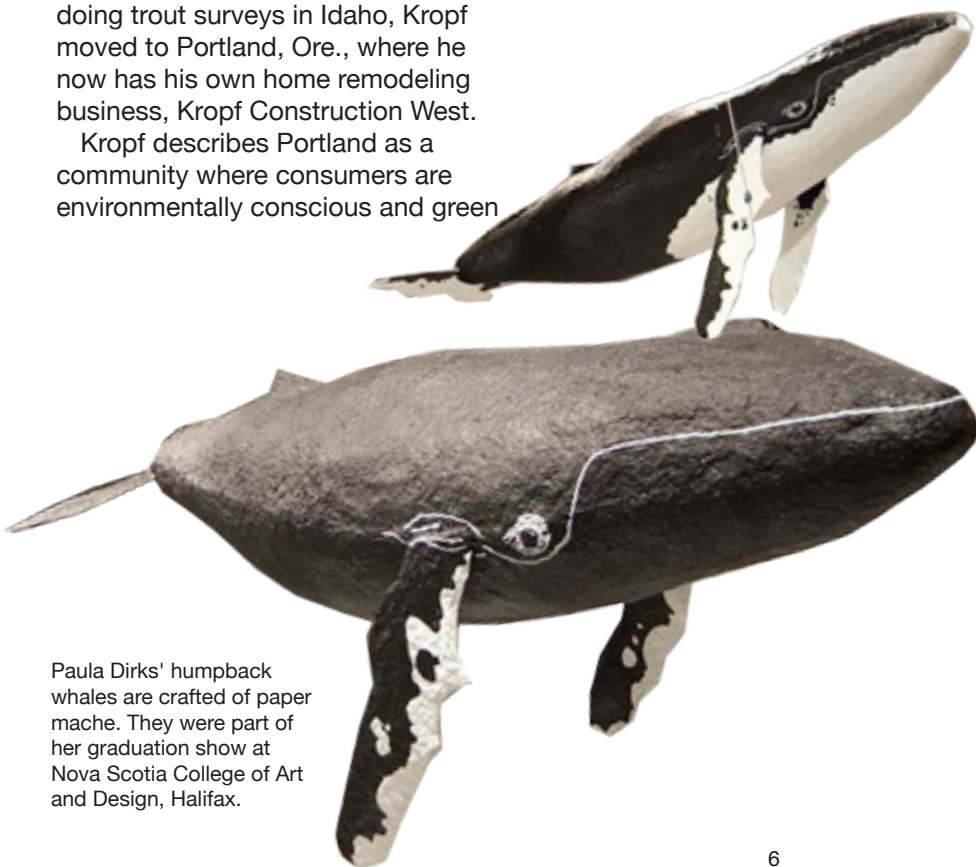
Paula Dirks participated in the first cohort of the Agroecology Summer Intensive in 2007. Later in her college experience, she followed up on her

interest in gardening by volunteering on an organic farm in southern India through Projects Abroad. The farm raised medicinal plants for ayurvedic medicine. Dirks majored in art, but retains an interest in environmental science.

Now:

Dirks is completing a BFA degree in ceramics at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. Currently she has a show featuring anatomically correct models of humpback whales, a subject she chose partly because the Nova Scotia coastline has the largest concentration of humpbacks in the world. Dirks’ whales are over six feet long and were hung from the ceiling of the gallery.

“Most of my art is environmentally influenced,” Dirks says. “I focus on animals or nature or people’s interactions with nature.” She likes to create visual reminders of nature’s hidden presence, even in urban settings. Another recent project involved a series of white porcelain mushrooms sprouting from telephone poles. §



Paula Dirks’ humpback whales are crafted of paper mache. They were part of her graduation show at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax.

Nature Notes:

Beloved Reptile Rests in Peace

By Carol Good-Elliott

This holiday season brought a sad discovery at Merry Lea's Learning Center. One morning, a staff member found our Northern Water Snake dead in her aquarium. Nero, named for her scientific name, *Nerodia sipedon*, had been a Merry Lea "staff member" since late summer of 2007. We received her from the Elkhart County Parks Department (ECPD) as a new baby. She was one of many babies born to ECPD's captive Northern Water Snake. At the time, Nero was barely 12" long and at her largest girth was the diameter of a pencil.

Soon after we got Nero, she became a regular part of many school programs. Most visiting groups include people who are anxious about being near snakes. Nero was an excellent snake to help people deal with their fears because of her extreme calmness. When we handled Nero with school groups we always gave participants a chance to stroke Nero if they wanted to and allowed them to decline if they didn't want to touch her. Many days, however, I saw both children and adults deciding to touch Nero in spite of their anxieties because of her gentleness. Often, these people wanted to touch or handle her several times after their first chance.

Nero became an important emissary, not only for snakes in general, but also for her species in particular. Northern Water Snakes are native to northeastern Indiana. They live around lakes, ponds, marshes and rivers. These snakes are excellent swimmers, catching most of their prey—mainly fish, tadpoles and frogs—in the water. They can also be found sunning in low bushes and trees reaching over the water surface or on the tops of muskrat lodges. In Indiana, harmless Northern Water Snakes are often misidentified as venomous water moccasins because



In the photo above, Amy Berry, an environmental education student from the 2011-2012 cohort, cradles Nero. As always, Nero is calm and gentle. Above, right, Baby Nero fit in the palm of a hand.

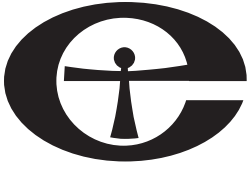
of their dark coloring and aquatic habits. However, water moccasins do not live in northern Indiana; they are only found in extreme southwestern Indiana near the Ohio River. Many Northern Water Snakes are killed due to this misidentification.

In Nero's time with us, she helped us dispel some of the myths and misunderstandings about snakes our visitors brought. The education staff of Merry Lea along with many past visitors will miss Nero. §



Policy Field Trip:

In January, the ten master's students in this year's environmental education cohort traveled by train to Washington, D.C. as part of their course on environmental issues. While in D.C., the grads visited policy makers, government offices, NGOs and grassroots programs to explore environmental concerns from multiple angles. The group also had their photograph taken with Indiana's Senator Lugar. §



Merry Lea
Environmental Learning Center
of Goshen College

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Spring 2012 Public Programs at Merry Lea

Spring Birding Challenge

March 1 to May 31

Gather a team of up to four adults and any number of children; then see how many species of birds you can spot during this three-month period. The Challenge concludes with a pizza party and photo show in early June. Email mlevents@goshen.edu to register; \$10 per team.

Bird Identification: Telling a Vireo from a Fly Catcher

Monday, March 5, 3 to 5 p.m. at Rieth Village

Kick off birding season with a little extra help from Lisa Zinn. Most of the session will take place indoors, but dress for a short walk outdoors. \$5

Sugar Bush Open House

Saturday, March 17, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at Yoder Farm

Come experience the sights, smells, sounds and tastes of a working maple syrup-making operation. Help tap a tree, carry sap from the woods to the sugarhouse, saw logs for firewood, and learn how sap changes into maple syrup. You can even bring along supplies for a pancake and sausage lunch in the woods. This program is held at the Yoder Farm near Hometown, IN. Directions and a list of lunch supplies will be provided following registration. Due to limited parking you **MUST** pre-register. Call 260-799-5869 or e-mail carolge@goshen.edu. Cost: \$2/person ages 5 and up.

Midwest Birding Expedition to Prairie Ridge State Natural Area, Newton, Ill.

Friday, March 30, 8 a.m. to Sunday, April 1, 8 p.m.

This event is now full.

Spring Break Frog Hike

Tuesday, April 3, 2012, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Many schools are on break this week, so our frog hike is geared for families. Bring the gang and we'll hunt down peepers and wood frogs and everything else that croaks. Hopefully you'll get to hold a frog as well as hear it. \$5 adults, \$2 children under 15.

Friends of Merry Lea Dinner & Wildflower Hike

Saturday, April 28, 2012, 4 to 8 p.m.

We'll begin with a spring hike at the peak of wildflower season. Dinner will be served at 6 p.m., followed by stimulating input from Merry Lea's Executive Director Luke Gascho. This event is free for our donors. Others are welcome to join us for \$15/person or \$25 per couple.

NatureFest

Friday, May 11, 6:30 p.m. until Saturday, May 12, 3:30 p.m.

Our annual family-friendly bash includes hikes for all ages and interests, booths with hands-on interactive activities, good food and camping overnight for those who desire. Kids \$5 any time all weekend; adults \$5 to \$15. \$