

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 | merrylea.goshen.edu

Homeschool Programs at Merry Lea

HOMESCHOOL PROGRAMMING IS ON the rise in Indiana and at Merry Lea. We consider our homeschoolers an important part of pursuing our mission to provide environmental education for people of all ages.

Since 2021, we have hosted our Junior and Teen Indiana Master Naturalist class in partnership with Gene Stratton-Porter in Rome City, Ind.

At the end of this program, students become official Jr/Teen Indiana Master Naturalists. Throughout the year, these 9 to 17 year olds learn about various nature topics to discover Indiana's outdoor world through hands-on activities, outdoor investigations, volunteering and learning from local experts.

We also offer custom field trips tailored specifically for homeschool co-op groups. Our standard field trip options are available year-round, including during the winter and summer months.

Each fall and spring we offer a homeschool co-op field trip day that families can register for individually. This fall's trip, Exploring Merry Lea Teaching Farm, invites students to engage with farm life and sustainable agriculture through interactive activities. In the spring, we'll head outdoors again for Exploring Nature, where families will discover local ecosystems, wildlife, and environmental science


Our homeschool series runs throughout the school year and features topics like insects, mammals, tracks and scat, biodiversity, and more. This year, we are also excited to offer both a morning and afternoon session.

Geared for elementary-aged children, Nature Explorers takes place each summer and combines outdoor play, science, and discovery through games, activities, and trail investigations.



Students looking at macroinvertebrates under a microscope.

We also offer Conservation Leadership School, a weeklong summer program for rising high school juniors and seniors interested in exploring careers and practices in natural resource conservation.

To learn more about our homeschool programs, to register for any current events or to begin planning a field trip visit our website at merrylea.goshen.edu/homeschool. 



Looking for ways to make a difference?

Merry Lea relies on the generosity of people like you to provide quality environmental education programs that are accessible for all ages.

Please consider becoming a Friend of Merry Lea. Thanks so much for your consideration.

You may give online at merrylea.goshen.edu/donate or call our office at (260) 799-5869.

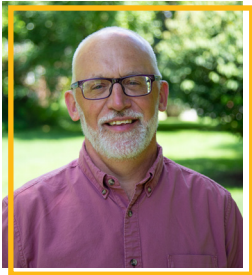
Can you "be-leaf" it?

Merry Lea's name is a homonym inspired by the names of our founders, Mary Jane and Lee Rieth. Merry Lea also means "Happy Meadow!"

Follow our social media outlets for more fun facts and updates!

Facebook: Facebook.com/MerryLeaEnvironmentalLearningCenter

Instagram: Instagram.com/merrylea_goshen/



VIEWS FROM THE CORNER OFFICE:
RYAN SENSENIG

Completing the Relationship

“Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift. The land knows you, even when you are lost.” - Robin Wall Kimmerer

AS A BRIEF INTRODUCTION, I am delighted to be serving as the interim, part-time Executive Director at Merry Lea. My first job in 2007 was as a half-time professor at Merry Lea with teaching responsibilities in the Biological Sciences Department at Goshen College. As I reflect on those 16 years of bringing undergraduate students to Merry Lea, I am struck with the uniqueness of this community. Arguably it contains some of the most diverse mixed of restored habitats in the region - habitats that have deeply affected many of us.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of Braiding Sweetgrass, suggests that restoring natural systems is also the same as restoring ourselves. Lately, I have been thinking a lot about this idea - how can ecological restoration change us?

Over the last year I have had the opportunity to hike with several of Merry Lea’s restoration ecologists as they tell stories of their work restoring various corners of Merry Lea. Several weeks ago, my students and I hiked with Freya Berntson who serves as Merry Lea’s Natural Resources Manager. Our goal was to understand her vision for healing a “wounded world.”

On this bright fall day, we plunged into the cattail marsh on High Lake, the muck soil oozing over the soles of our boots. Most of the cattails around us were an invasive species, successfully crowding out the natives. They seemed to metaphorically have the same effect on us as they towered over us, blocking our view. After a short walk, we punched through into an opening and were surrounded by a diverse mix of native plants. Freya spoke of her long term, persistent efforts to control the cattails using burning and targeted use of herbicides. We glimpsed, for a moment, the possible.

Almost exactly a year earlier, I was on a similar trek with Bill Minter, Merry Lea’s former Director of Land Management. Bill gingerly led my students and I on a gentle climb atop an ancient sand dune perched above High Lake. Underneath the spreading arms of oaks, we walked through an open, park-like habitat with stippled light darting through the swaying bottlebrush grass.

For years, Bill worked to remove trees and returned fire in order to resurrect a thin sliver of the rarest of northern Indiana habitats - the black oak savanna. Re-engaging with the land was healing for both the savanna and for us. We stood in silence in this moment of time, envisioning both the past and the future.

Visitors to Merry Lea find renewal in the natural beauty - indeed splendor - of its diverse fens, prairies, and savannas. But many may not realize how many of the habitats that feel “pristine” are in fact living stories of human involvement. Large portions of Merry Lea were previously in cropland, grazed, or drained. Founders Mary Jane and Lee Rieth knew they had a diamond in the rough; all the habitat elements were here awaiting our engagement.

Perhaps this is just one way that ecological restoration changes us. It invites us to notice the past wounds. More importantly, restoration simultaneously looks forward “choosing joy over despair” as we imagine a different future. This is a beautiful tension. It requires thoughtfulness, planning, and lots of hard work. It requires restraining and engaging and knowing when to do each. In essence it helps us recreate communities where humans and nature can jointly thrive. In this process of give and take, we realize that nature also needs us.

ABOUT MERRY LEA

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.

The Merry Leaflet, published in spring, summer, fall and winter, provides news about programs, updates and developments at Merry Lea. Kayla Beasley is its editor and the author of articles without bylines.

TEAM MEMBERS

- Gonzalo Barahona Hernandez**
Operations Assistant
- Kayla Beasley**
Associate Director of Communications & Marketing
- Freya Berntson**
Natural Resources Manager
- Carol Good-Elliott**
Environmental Educator
- Stephany Hancock**
Environmental Educator & Residence Life Coordinator
- Luke Kreider**
Assistant Professor, Religion & Sustainability
- Melinda Long**
Office Manager
- John Mischler**
Associate Professor, Biology & Sustainability
- Ruth Mischler**
Instructor, Biology & Sustainability
- Christi Nickey**
Farm Manager
- Jonathon Schramm**
Professor & Chair, Biology & Sustainability / Director of Institute for Ecological Regeneration
- Ryan Sensenig**
Interim Executive Director
- Jeremiah Sharp**
Environmental Educator & Public Programs Coordinator
- Foy Spicer**
Interim Managing Director
- Kaitlyn Sproles**
Director of Environmental Education Outreach
- Alan Stadler**
Building Manager
- Josie Strader**
Property Manager

BOARD MEMBERS

- Andy Rieth**, *Chair*
- Greg Perigo**, *Vice Chair*
- Doug Vendrely**
- Carl Weaver**
- Bekah Houff**, *Secretary*
- Beth Squires**
Ex Officio: Ann Vendrely
Ex Officio: Ryan Sensenig
Ex Officio: Foy Spicer

Completing the Relationship, continued from page 2

This week I was looking at some of the historical documents explaining the mission and vision for Merry Lea. I came across a description of the rationale for the inception of our logo. From the original 1973 Board of Directors document it explains:

- the symbol is basically an “E”, standing for environment, ecology, earth, and everyone.
- it is also a circle symbolizing the earth.
- humans are at the center of the earth’s ecosystem.
- the human is an integral part of the “E” and is also supported by it denoting our interdependence with the natural environment.
- the break in the circle symbolizes that any relationship with the environment is not yet complete, but we through Merry Lea can complete the relationship.



It is my wish for visitors of Merry Lea that they experience not only the joy of walking in a marsh or savanna, but also become inspired to participate in restoring a corner of their own world...completing the relationship.

We look forward to our continuing partnership with you towards this end!



Prairie Oak Savanna

Become an Americorps Member Today!

ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT THE environment and excited to inspire others? You’re in luck! We’re currently seeking a dedicated AmeriCorps member to join our team!

This is a unique opportunity to design and deliver high-quality environmental education programs for people of all ages, serving from now through August 2026 with a minimum of 900 service hours. You’ll work closely alongside our experienced Environmental Education and Outreach educators, gaining hands-on experience and making an indelible impact in our community.

“This position is a way to serve my community and connect with others who are also interested in sustainable agriculture,” shares Elyssa, one of our current AmeriCorps members.

AmeriCorps is more than just a service program. It’s a chance to grow both personally and professionally. Rooted in values of civic engagement, service,



Americorps Members teaching a Wonderful Wetlands Field Trip in the Wetland Garage.

and community-building, AmeriCorps empowers individuals from all backgrounds to make a difference while developing new skills and meaningful connections.

“I’m really looking forward to watching and helping students grow through these programs at Merry Lea,” says Natalie, another AmeriCorps member. “I especially

love seeing the moment the content really clicks with the students.”

If you’re eager to educate, inspire, and serve, while gaining valuable experience, we’d love to hear from you! If you are interested in applying or learning more about this position, please reach out to Kaitlyn Sproles at kwsproles@goshen.edu or call us at 260-799-5869.

Merry Lea Team Updates

Ryan Sensenig



New **Interim Executive Director**
Ph.D. University of California, Davis - Ecology, 2007
B.S. Eastern Mennonite University - Biology, International Agriculture, 1992

In addition to serving as part-time interim Executive Director at Merry Lea, Ryan is also a Professor of the Practice in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Notre Dame. Previously, he served as professor of biology at Goshen College for 16 years where he taught a variety of courses including ecology, research seminar, restoration ecology, science teaching methods and marine biology. He served

on the Merry Lea board as the President’s appointee from 2020 to 2022. His research focuses on tallgrass prairie restoration in northern Indiana (including Merry Lea’s Goodrich Prairie) and savanna conservation in Kenya. In both habitats, he and his students study how fire and grazing influence soil carbon processes. With his family, he lives on Little Bluestem Farm in Goshen, Ind., which includes 11 acres of restored tallgrass prairie. We are thrilled to welcome Ryan into this leadership role here at Merry Lea. He brings a deep love for this place and a strong background in ecology and education. We’re looking forward to working with him and seeing where this next chapter takes us.

Foy Spicer



Transition **Interim Managing Director**
B.S. Public Horticulture, Iowa State University, 2003

Foy grew up in Iowa, graduating from Iowa State with a degree in Horticulture. She interned at Chicago Botanical Garden, Longwood Gardens and ISU Extension. Then served in the Peace Corps along the edge of primary rainforests in Panama as a Sustainable Agriculture Systems volunteer. When she returned to The States, she moved to Indiana to be a horticulturist at the Garbis Arboretum. For the two years before coming to Merry Lea, she was a guide for the Montessori

School at WPC and developed their summer Farm School program for 3-12 year olds. Foy joined Merry Lea as an Environmental Educator in 2023. In September 2025, Foy stepped into the Interim Managing Director role. Foy lives in North Manchester with her partner and their two kids. As a foodie, she loves cooking and fermenting with wild and locally grown meat and produce. Foy’s passion for education, community engagement, and organizational excellence has made a lasting impact here at Merry Lea. We’re excited to see how her leadership will help shape the future of our work and community in the months ahead.

Jason Martin



Vacant **Executive Director**
B.S. Biology, Ramapo College of New Jersey, 1998
M.S. Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, University of Illinois, 2003
Ph.D. Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, University of Florida, 2009

Jason departed Merry Lea in July 2025. We are grateful for his five years of dedicated service. During his tenure, Jason strengthened our collaborative workplace culture at Merry Lea, helping to restore a clear mission focus and a spirit of teamwork. He upheld sound fiscal practices and

advanced environmental education across collegiate, K–12, and public audiences. In 2021, he launched a study on an endangered species found at Merry Lea, the Blanding’s Turtle, engaging student researchers through the Hickory and Linton Scholars program. The Linton Scholars award is an initiative he established in 2022 in memory of Goshen College Professor Mary Linton. Over the past five years, Jason has led with educational vision, and ecological conservation — enhancing programs, stewarding the land, and deepening connections with neighbors, local communities and the region. We wish him the best in his future endeavors.

Habitat Highlight: Bear Lake Prairie

BY Freya Berntson



Prescribed fire in Bear Lake Prairie in March 2025.

IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE A FAVORITE season, what would it be? Autumn in a prairie fen community, like the one at Bear Lake Prairie, just might steal your heart. Golden grasses sway, asters bloom, and the air carries a quiet kind of magic. Bear Lake Prairie is a remnant marl beach prairie formed on clay marl that developed from mussel shells deposited as a shoal under the original glacial lake. This area hosts some of Merry Lea’s most unique plant communities. Maintained by periodic prescribed fire, the eastern half was burned earlier this year in March 2025. The western portion will be burned in another few years. The green of summer is fading, but color and texture abound in this

landscape. Cooling temperatures and shorter days give way to a warm pallet of browns, yellows and reds. The botanical community offers nearly every shape imaginable as leaves crinkle and seeds ripen. The little bluestem has erupted into tan and crimson tipped with feathery, ripe seeds. Early October welcomes the delicate white spirals of nodding ladies’ tresses orchids lining the trail. Shrubby cinquefoil are beginning to doff their yellow blossoms but continue to hold onto their lobed leaves as they brown and curl, offering textured cover for wildlife continuing to prepare for winter. Plant life may be metabolically slowing down, but the prairie is still in motion. Wind sways the blanket of

drying sedges shining in the sun. Aerially dispersed seeds of goldenrod and ironweed spread open waiting for gusts of wind to send them to new life further afield. Small birds and mammals dart about devouring seeds. Perched between Bear Lake to the north and the Onion Bottom Swamp to the south, a stroll through Bear Lake Prairie offers the chance to see bald eagles, ospreys, and great blue herons flying over or perched nearby. Autumn is a final celebration of the growing season’s accomplishments before the rest and reset of winter. You are welcome to join the festivities at Bear Lake Prairie or anywhere else the trails at Merry Lea. 



Thank you for your support

Thank you to the following people for donating to Merry Lea during this quarter. Your support has contributed to delivering safe environmental programming, maintaining facilities and the upkeep of hiking trails.

Anna Richey and Chris Mort
Doug and Joy Landis
Jakob zumFelde
John and Joann Smith

Karen Bradley
Kathryn Aschliman
Ken Nisly-Nagele
Roberta and Larry Yoder
Sam and Jan Schwartz
Anonymous



Growth & Change: Staff Reflections

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, we have all taken time to reflect on the many accomplishments and transformative changes we have made at Merry Lea.

Each staff member, whether part of Environmental Education Outreach, Operations, Administration, or our Collegiate programs, have contributed to a vibrant, collaborative workplace culture rooted in our shared mission.

While our individual journeys and tasks vary, the collective impact of our work

is undeniable. As part of this reflection, each staff and faculty member shared their personal insights from their time working here at Merry Lea.

These reflections span a variety of roles and experiences. They offer a glimpse into our daily dedication, behind-the-scenes efforts and meaningful connections that make our work so impactful.

Together, we paint a rich and honest picture of what it means to be part of this community: committed to

environmental education for people of all ages, sustainability, a natural sanctuary for Northern Indiana’s plants and animals, growth, and a setting for creating opportunities that benefit the human body and spirit while not exploiting the land or excessively disturbing its ecosystems.

Below, you’ll find our individual reflections and the accomplishments that have stood out the most to us. We are proud of how far we have come and are excited for what lies ahead.

Gonzalo Barahona Hernández Operations Assistant

Gonzalo reflected on his journey from starting as student to becoming a staff member. He first connected with the organization through the Agroecology Summer Intensive (ASI) in 2022, followed by conducting research on grazing and prairie burning in 2023. He later worked as a farm hand to help ensure other students had meaningful experiences just like the ones he had. He now supports the various spaces that have strongly shaped who he is today.

Kayla Beasley Associate Director of Communications & Marketing

During her time at Merry Lea, Kayla has worked to ensure that the organization’s branding and marketing are consistent, mission-driven, and accessible to a broader audience. Just months after joining the team, she led the launch of Merry Lea’s new website and has since expanded outreach through tabling events, media coverage, and targeted advertising—significantly increasing the organization’s visibility and engagement across the region.



Sustainability Students: Crystal, Carmen, Simon, Isaak (from left to right)



Nature Preschoolers wading and exploring Kesling Wetland.

Freya Berntson Natural Resources Manager

For Freya, it has been a profound joy to be hired to care for the very place that deepened her love and respect for the natural world. Sharing that sense of care with students, visitors, and volunteers has been especially meaningful. A particular highlight of her time at Merry Lea has been working to build a committed stewardship volunteer group—an effort that continues to grow.

Carol Good-Elliott Environmental Educator

Since 2019, Carol has led the Wolf Lake Nature Preschool, a program developed in partnership with the Cole Family YMCA. As the lead teacher from Merry Lea, she has helped shape a learning environment where young children engage deeply with the natural world. Over the years, the program has served 83 students, offering immersive, outdoor experiences four days a week from September through May—rain, snow, or shine.

Stephany Hancock Environmental Educator & Residence Life Coordinator

Inspired by her professional development opportunity in Forest Bathing, Stephany began a project documenting seasonal changes at the vernal pond (between trail markers F and G) through weekly photographs. Over the past year, she has captured the pond’s dynamic transformations, creating a visual resource that will help students observe and explore how ecosystems shift across the seasons.

Luke Beck Kreider Assistant Professor, Religion & Sustainability

Luke celebrates the transformational impact of the Sustainability Semester, particularly through his course on Sustainability, Spirituality & Ethics, which challenges students to explore environmental issues through new ethical and spiritual lenses.

see *Reflections*, page 7

Melinda Long Office Manager

Melinda has been keeping day-to-day operations running including the bookstore in the Learning Center.

John Mischler Associate Professor, Biology & Sustainability

John is especially proud of the progress that has been made in aligning the farm spaces with Merry Lea’s educational programs. Over the past five years, the farm team improved soil quality, installed water access in the Teaching Garden and orchard, and redesigned growing spaces to better support learning. He’s valued collaborating across departments, learning from colleagues, and building a shared vision for Merry Lea’s mission.



Merry Lea Teaching Garden at Rieth Village.

Ruth Mischler Instructor, Biology & Sustainability

Ruth highlights the local food week featuring beets through the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network, the Teaching Garden redesign and restructuring the greenhouse beds. She is proud of her Agroecology Summer Intensive (ASI) and sustainability students for their active, engaged learning throughout these immersive experiences.

Christi Nickey Farm Manager

In the past six months, Christi has deep-cleaned the barn and greenhouse, replaced the hoophouse plastic, and has removed landscape fabric and rusted staples from the teaching garden and orchard. She has mentored two Savannah Institute interns, hosted a successful field day with Urban Soil Health and partners,



AmeriCorps Members: Natalie, Elyssa & Aleah (from left to right)

meat birds, pastured pigs, and dairy cattle. Christi also established biosecurity protocols to ensure the health and safety of the animals.

Jonathon Schramm Professor & Chair, Biology & Sustainability; Director, Institute for Ecological Regeneration (IER)

A highlight of Jonathon’s has been creating and improving off-campus courses in India and Detroit. These courses also make extensive use of patterns of teaching and learning that Merry Lea has developed for him over the years, allowing the “Merry Lea Way” to extend its impact far beyond our local watershed through immersive learning experiences.

Jeremiah Sharp Environmental Educator & Public Programs Coordinator

Jeremiah is proud to have launched Merry Lea’s first adult Indiana Master Naturalist (IMN) program, expanding what was previously only available to junior and teen participants. Looking ahead, he’s excited about a new monthly hiking group starting in 2026 to reach new audiences. He values creating inclusive programs and has loved engaging sustainability students, staff, faculty, and MAEE participants, ensuring everyone feels they have a stake in Merry Lea’s public programs.

Foy Spicer Interim Managing Director

Foy highlights the positive impact that all of our AmeriCorps members have had on Environmental Education Outreach (EEO), providing valuable support to programs and expanding our capacity. She’s also proud of the continued growth of the volunteer program, which plays a vital role in connecting more people to Merry Lea’s mission.

Kaitlyn Sproles Director of Environmental Education Outreach

Kaitlyn is proud of expanding the Indiana Master Naturalist (IMN) programs, reaching over 150 Jr./Teen participants since 2021 and launching the adult program in 2025. She also celebrates record-breaking attendance for various programs. AmeriCorps continues to strengthen the team, with three members supporting Environmental Education Outreach (EEO), who all started in fall of 2025.

Alan Stadler Buildings Manager

Alan highlights major system and infrastructure improvements that have increased both efficiency and sustainability across Merry Lea’s facilities. He’s also been actively focused on expanding access and ensuring greater inclusivity for people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities.



Staff & Volunteers conducting a prescribed burn in our Shew Tract.

Josie Strader-Bergey Property Manager

Josie contributed to infrastructure improvements like the K Trail boardwalk and north vernal pond dock. She also led the construction of the cider press platform and bat boxes, supporting both educational use and habitat enhancement.



Merry Lea

*Environmental Learning Center
of Goshen College*

1700 S. Main St.
Goshen, IN 46526

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Events

* *Registration required*

Register or learn more at: merrylea.goshen.edu/events

Enchanted Forest

WHERE: Farmstead, 2152 S 425 W, Albion, IN 46701

WHEN: Friday, **October 17 & Saturday, October 18** | 7 – 8:30 p.m.

COST: \$5/person (cash preferred); ages 2 & under are free

Join Merry Lea this fall for an “enchanted” night hike! Trail guides will lead groups by lantern-light to meet real “live” animals on our trails. These friendly creatures will tell you about their diets, habits and favorite places. Our costumed staff and volunteers will answer questions about life as a native Indiana animal. Hikes are one hour long and head out about every 25 minutes.

While you wait for a guide, enjoy music and snacks. End the evening sipping hot cocoa around a campfire!

* A Year in the Garden Series #1: Winter Prep & Spring Planning

WHERE: Rieth Village, 4415 W 200 S, Albion, IN 46701

WHEN: Saturday, **November 8** | 1 – 4 p.m.

COST: \$15 per adult

The first session in this series is for anyone, whether you already have a garden, want one, or have never gardened before. It's a space to learn together, share knowledge, and explore the world of gardening and food preservation. We will guide you through the process of designing a garden that works for your space. We'll wrap up with a simple meal made with fresh ingredients harvested from our fall garden.

* Fall Family Night Hike

WHERE: Farmstead, 2152 S 425 W, Albion, IN 46701

WHEN: Saturday, **November 8** | 5:30 – 7:30 p.m.

COST: \$7/adult, \$5/child

Join us for a guided night hike through the crisp autumn of Merry Lea, where the rustling leaves, cool air, and starry skies bring the landscape to life in a whole new way. As twilight fades, we'll explore the trails around Kesling Wetland by moonlight using our senses. This hike is suitable for all ages, sturdy closed toed shoes recommended.

* Native Plant Series #3: Native Seed Saving & Sowing

WHERE: Farmstead, 2152 S 425 W, Albion, IN 46701

WHEN: Saturday, **December 12** | 9:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

COST: \$15/adult

What do native seeds need to grow? What is stratification? What do you mean scarification?! Many of our native seeds require different “treatments” in order to grow their best and take root. We will go over a variety of ways to get your native garden growing.