

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

Hickory Scholar Student in Residence

THIS PAST SUMMER AT MERRY LEA, our first Hickory Scholar artist in residence, Kat Columna lived on-site to fully immerse herself into Merry Lea's diverse habitats, learn more about native species, their behavior and environmental changes.

Kat recently graduated from Goshen College with an art major and marketing minor. Her faculty research advisor was Sara Method, Associate Professor of Art.

Throughout her eight-week summer research project, Kat experimented with

a variety of artistic techniques and mediums. Her work included watercolor paintings, monoprints made from prairie plants, embroidery, acrylic mixed media portraits of some of her favorite places around Merry Lea, and sketches and field notes documenting the species she encountered.

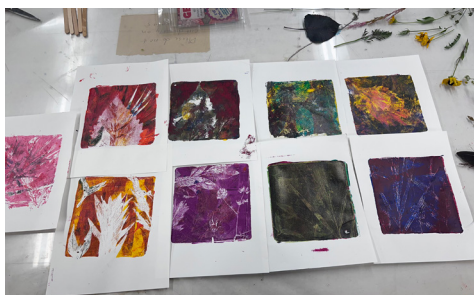
"In my painting, I wanted to create portraits that could be interpreted as a focus on how different species interacted with the environment or how the environment interacted with the species," said Kat. "I did this by painting the environment and carving different species that live or frequent the area and stamped them on top of my paintings."

Her research extended beyond creating art. Kat explored writings by naturalists and scientists, including Robin Wall Kimmerer and Gene Stratton-Porter, researched field guides and learned how to build routine into a residency program.

Kat's art studio was set up in the Cider Shop at the Farmstead, where she had a drafting table, easels, art supplies and space to work on her projects.

A few of Kat's completed pieces will be donated to Merry Lea and displayed around the Learning Center, allowing visitors to experience the property

through her artistic perspective. We are thrilled to have hosted our first Hickory Scholar Artist in Residence and look forward to seeing how Kat's work continues to grow from her time immersed in the landscapes and living communities of Merry Lea. 



Working on various monoprints in the studio



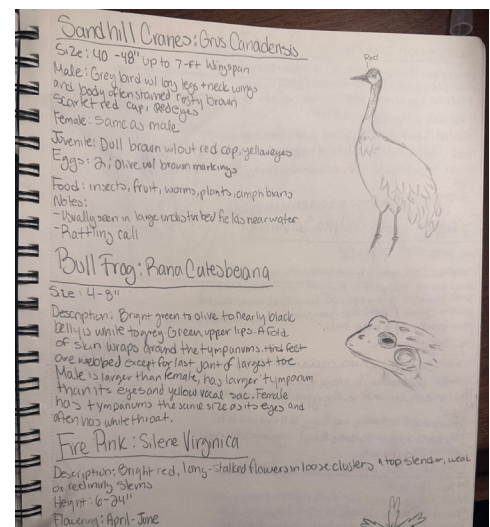
Monoprint of prairie plants found at Merry Lea



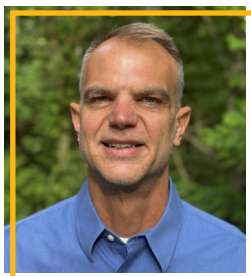
Watercolor painting overlooking Kesling Wetland



Embroidery and sketch of a Sandhill Crane and flowers



Notes and sketches of different species Kat identified around the Farmstead



GREETINGS FROM THE CORNER OFFICE
JASON KISSEL

When I was just five years old on a mountaintop near Boise, I made a big announcement: I was going to spend my life caring for God's trees. For the following forty-eight years, I've done just that - looking after His trees and His creation.

Along the way, God added caring for His people to my calling. So, alongside my forestry degree, I went back to school and earned a degree in ministry. Now my highest purpose is facilitating people helping nature, and nature helping people.

That is why Merry Lea's tagline of "where earth and people meet" resonates so deeply with me. Some people interpret that "meeting" as a first introduction - and often, it is. For many, Merry Lea is the first significant contact people have with nature.

However, Merry Lea also provides the venue and facilitation of ongoing meetings between nature and people. These repeated meetings deepen the relationship, increase awareness, stimulate new ways of thinking and cultivate a knowing that only comes from frequent and purposeful attention sustained over time.

I love that Merry Lea provides everyone opportunities to meet with nature -- and at their current interest level. From someone taking a short walk in nature with the family, to someone performing Master's level coursework and research, or to someone seeking to encounter God, Merry Lea facilitates that -- and everything in-between.

My first significant meeting with earth occurred on that mountaintop; since then, I've deepened my relationship through frequent follow-up meetings. My first meeting with Merry Lea was in 2007; now I'm excited to re-introduce myself and build a deeper relationship with this special place daily.

I would love to connect with you too - whether it's for the first time or the fiftieth. Please drop me an email, give me a call or swing by my office next time you're deepening your relationship with earth through Merry Lea.

It's a true honor to continue my life's calling here, working alongside you to bring people and nature together.

May you discover deeper meaning, peace and belonging as you explore nature this season,

 Jason

jkissel@goshen.edu



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 is dedicated to providing:

- Environmental education for people of all ages
- A natural sanctuary for Northern Indiana's plants and animals
- A setting for creating opportunities that benefit the human body and spirit while not exploiting the land or excessively disturbing its ecosystems

TEAM MEMBERS

Gonzalo Barahona Hernández
Operations Assistant

Kayla Beasley
Associate Director of Communications & Marketing

Freya Berntson
Natural Resources Manager

Carol Good-Elliott
Environmental Educator

Stephany Hancock
Public Programs Coordinator / Environmental Educator

Jason Kissel
Executive Director

Luke Beck Kreider
Assistant Professor, Religion & Sustainability

Melinda Long
Office Manager

Ruth Mischler
Farm Manager

Jonathon Schramm
*Professor & Chair, Biology & Sustainability;
Director, Institute for Ecological Regeneration*

Aleah Southworth
Environmental Educator

Foy Spicer
Interim Managing Director

Kaitlyn Sproles
Director of Environmental Education

Alan Stadler
Buildings Manager

BOARD MEMBERS

Andy Rieth, Chair

Greg Perigo, Vice Chair

Doug Vendrely

Carl Weaver

Bekah Houff

Beth Squires

Rod Diller

Bruce Stahly

Ex Officio: Ann Vendrely

Ex Officio: Jason Kissel

Ex Officio: Foy Spicer

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.

John Blosser and Beck Unternahrer
Gift-in-kind artwork, Oil Painting:
Fall Cabin at Merry Lea

Anna Richey and Chris Mort
Evelyn and Roger zumFelde
Karen Bradley

Melinda Long

Wayne and Roveen Yoder

Anne and Mark Byler

Kathleen Kremer and Rich McFall

Kristen Mast

Jarrod Price and Emily Brandeberry

Tina Springer and Peter Kenagy

Connor Wyse

Ben Zimmerman

Susan Stoesz

Roy and Connie Bender

Shirley Friesen

Beth Squires

Alice and Willard Roth

Ryan and Nisha Springer

Jan and Michael Landis

Craig & Sally Johnson

Nicolas Kauffman and Rebekah Houff

Mary Berghoff and Neil Meyer

Natasha Manor and Patrick Ewing

Noble County Community
Foundation Inc

Jason and Amy Kissel

Janel Rogers

Joann and John Smith



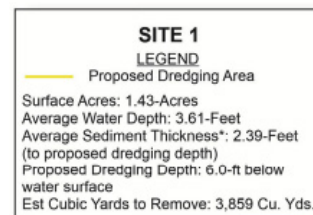
High Lake Dredging Project

LAST YEAR, Merry Lea received estimates for deepening and widening the High Lake outlet channel [Site 1]. This will enhance water flow and increase boating access.

We are grateful for the support of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, who has awarded Merry Lea a Lake and River Enhancement (LARE) grant of \$80,000 toward the sediment removal project. The remainder is to be split between Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College and the High Lake community.

Merry Lea pledges our support of \$24,000. We have invited the High Lake community to consider contributing to the needed \$24,000 community match supporting this investment. As of late August 2026, the community has contributed 75% of their match! We have officially signed a contract with McCullough Excavating and Silt Removal to move forward with this project that will begin this fall.

For any questions or to learn more about this project, visit our website at merrylea.goshen.edu/hlsrp or reach out to merrylea@goshen.edu. 



Merry Lea Team Updates

Christi Nickey



Vacant Farm Manager

*M.S.C. Regenerative Organic Agriculture,
Maharishi International University, 2024*

*B.A. Regenerative Organic Agriculture,
Maharishi International University, 2022*

*B.A. Animal Science, Clemson University,
2013*

*A.A.S. Culinary Arts, Florida Culinary
Institute, 2001*

Christi joined the Merry Lea team in March 2025 as our Farm Manager for the Merry Lea Teaching Farm. Christi has a deep love

of nature and is passionate about seed sovereignty, local food webs, social justice and education.

In her free time, she enjoys camping, cycling, reading, cooking, growing native plants, birding, and spending time with her three children.

After a year of working at Merry Lea, Farm Manager Christi decided to return to Iowa. We are grateful for the work she put in and her generosity sharing her knowledge and seeds. Her last day was April 14th. We wish her and her family all the best in their next chapter.

Merry Lea Team Updates Continued

Josie Strader-Bergey



Vacant Property Manager

B.A. Environmental Science, Goshen College, 2022

Josie graduated from Goshen College in 2022 with a degree in Environmental Science and joined the Merry Lea team in April 2023. In January 2025, she stepped into the role of Property Manager!

During her time at Merry Lea, Josie wore many hats. She operated and maintained a wide variety of tools, machinery, vehicles and equipment; constructed and maintained trails and trail structures; assisted with programs

when needed; provided after-hours support for students in residence; and contributed countless hours and talents to keeping Merry Lea running smoothly.

We are grateful for all that Josie brought to Merry Lea during her time with us and for the many ways she helped care for this special place.

Josie has now moved on to her next adventure as a maintenance technician at Lacasa in Goshen, Indiana. We are excited to see where this next chapter takes her and wish her nothing but the best in her new role!

Jeremiah Sharp



Vacant Environmental Educator & Public Programs Coordinator

M.A. Environmental Education, Goshen College, 2023

B.S. Biology, B.S. Environmental Studies, Manchester University, 2022

Jeremiah graduated from Manchester University in 2022 and began his journey here at Merry Lea as a graduate student in our Master of Arts in Environmental Education program shortly after. After completing this degree, he joined the Merry Lea team in

June 2023 as our Residence Life Coordinator and Environmental Educator and later transitioned in to our Public Programs Coordinator and Environmental Educator in July 2024.

He managed and coordinated public programs, delivered curriculum, planned events, mentored MAEE students, took care of our ambassador animals and more.

Jeremiah is now beginning a new chapter as a middle school science teacher. We wish him nothing but the best as he embarks on this new adventure in the classroom, and we can't wait to see the many ways he will inspire and influence the next generation of students.

Ruth Mischler



Transitioned Farm Manager - Part Time

M.S. Agronomy, The Pennsylvania State University, 2009

B.S. Environmental Science (Concentration in Technology and Field Studies), Lipscomb University, 2006

B.S. Elementary Education, Brigham Young University, 1998

Certified Permaculture Design Consultant, Permaculture Institute of North America, 2020

Prior to joining Goshen College/Merry Lea, Ruth conducted international agronomic research as a U.S. Student Fulbright Grantee in partnership with the Zambian Ministry of Agriculture, focusing on root crop variety trials and weed management.

Ruth began at Merry Lea as an Assistant Professor in the Sustainability and Environmental Education Department in 2017. She later became our Assistant Farm Director and is now our part time Farm Manager!

As an avid outdoor enthusiast, she enjoys hiking, running, canoeing, reading, journaling, gardening, raising livestock, and spending time with her husband and three children. She cherishes the local community and is always seeking new ways to strengthen regional networks and inspire future environmental leaders.

We're excited to see how Ruth continues to transform our Teaching Farm with her 15 years of international, hands-on agricultural experience and expertise in agronomy!

Stephany Hancock



Transitioned Public Programs Coordinator / Environmental Educator

M.A. Environmental Education, Goshen College, 2023

B.S. Early Childhood Education, Purdue Fort Wayne, 2020

Stephany was a preschool teacher in northeastern Indiana for about 10 years. In 2018, she started at a Montessori school and fell in love. The Montessori philosophy utilizes nature in a way that resonates with Stephany. As she gained more experience, and a credential for Montessori early childhood, she found herself seeking more education for the world around her. That led her to the

master's program at Goshen College.

After graduating, Stephany worked with an early education facility for a year to help their staff gain knowledge and appreciation of the outdoors. She came back to Merry Lea in 2024 as our Environmental Educator and Residence Life Coordinator. Now she is fulfilling the role of Public Programs Coordinator.

Outside of work, Stephany enjoys a variety of hobbies including knitting, reading, and spending time outdoors. She enjoys exploring the things Fort Wayne (her current home) has to offer like trails, historic sites, and food with her partner & fur babies. Her favorite Merry Lea program is Enchanted Forest!

Jason Kissel



New Executive Director

M.A. Ministry, Bethel University, 2016

B.S. Forestry, Purdue University, 1996

At the age of five, Jason declared that his life would be spent caring for God's trees. He's done just that with his life – taking care of God's trees and creation as an arborist, urban forester, natural resources administrator, executive director of a land trust, and now in his leadership role at Merry Lea.

Along the way, God added caring for His people to his calling, so he earned a degree in ministry and serves as an ordained pastor. Jason is most motivated while combining both callings – utilizing nature to introduce, or

deepen, one's relationship with God.

Bringing 20 years of executive leadership experience in land conservation and natural resources, Jason will oversee the development of educational and public programming, lead strategic planning and budget preparation and collaborate closely with the Goshen College Biology Department to advance academic and research opportunities at Merry Lea.

Jason and his wife have two adult children. Jason enjoys creating stacks of firewood, tackling the occasional long bicycle ride or run, fishing, reading, and gardening.

We are thrilled to have Jason as part of the Merry Lea team!

Aleah Southworth



New Environmental Educator

B.S. Communications, minor in Intercultural Studies, Grace College, 2017

Aleah originally came to Merry Lea as a volunteer and later as our first AmeriCorps volunteer in spring of 2025! She is looking forward to strengthening her connections with students in the community, co-workers at Merry Lea and Goshen College and the natural world.

Her journey into the environmental world first began in 2022 when she enrolled in the Indiana Master Naturalist program in Kosciusko County, which deepened her

understanding of Indiana ecosystems and fueled her commitment to environmental stewardship.

When she is not working, you can find Aleah spending time with loved ones, working on a sewing project, pottery, walking, gardening, cooking or baking.

Her favorite place on the property is the Black Oak Savanna loop at Luckey's Landing and she is looking forward to teaching more Rock Cycle.

We are so excited to officially welcome Aleah as a staff member and can't wait to see how she continues to inspire the next generation of students that visit Merry Lea!

Habitat Highlight: Luckey's Savanna and Oak Woodland

BY Freya Berntson

ON THE NORTHEAST SIDE OF High Lake, you can experience an increasingly rare ecosystem: savannas and oak woodlands. In the absence of disturbance, these areas often transition into closed canopy forests. These ecosystems can be described as disturbance dependent. Fire is an integral component, and disturbance, that many of our northeast Indiana ecosystems have evolved with. Removing fire from the landscape is frequently implicated as a major cause of these ecosystem changes.

After many years of land management including invasive species removal and reintroduction of fire, the area is now a beautiful example of a black oak savanna to oak woodland continuum.

The Luckey's savanna begins to the north of the pavilion at Luckey's Landing. This area is less than two acres in area, but offers a gorgeous display of full to partial sun loving plants including butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and Ohio spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohimensis*).

The trail through the savanna leads visitors through the gradual transition to oak woodland. A woodland has more trees per acre than a savanna, meaning more shade, which means different light resources available to understory plants.

Along the trail, you will see plants that require this additional shade to thrive including bottlebrush grass (*Elymus hystrix*), big leaf aster (*Eurybia*

macrophylla) and starry campion (*Silene stellata*).

There is no distinct line that demarcates where one habitat begins and the other ends. A keen observer will notice a gradual change from one to the other. Given space, time and disturbance like fire, savannas and oak woodlands can ebb and flow into each other.

This area is open to the public daily from dawn to dusk. The nearest parking area is at the Learning Center. You can view our trails by visiting our website. A visit to Luckey's Savanna and Oak Woodland is worth the hike any time of year - just follow the 'K' trail towards the north gate! 



Luckey's Savanna and Oak Woodland



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?

Hike all 8 miles of Merry Lea's trails and earn a FREE hiking stick medallion! Medallions are also available for \$10 in our bookstore.

For more fun facts about Merry Lea, follow our social media outlets for more fun facts!

Facebook: Facebook.com/MerryLeaEnvironmentalLearningCenter

Instagram: Instagram.com/merrylea_goshen/

Stewardship in Action



PLANT SWAP RECAP

Merry Lea hosted our first plant swap in May in partnership with Indiana Native Plant Society (INPS). Despite a rainy start to the day, plant enthusiasts from the community gathered to share their extra plants, discover new varieties and connect with fellow growers.

Participants brought extra native plants and vegetables to trade, while those who didn't have plants to swap were still able to participate and take home something new to grow. Participants took turns choosing plants to bring home and shared their gardening knowledge along the way.

Thank you to everyone who attended and helped make our first plant swap a success! Save the date for 2027 - our next plant swap will be on Saturday, May 15. We hope to see you there!

CATTLE GRAZING PASTURE WALK

In late August, Merry Lea personnel, regional land managers, farmers and agricultural educators gathered together to explore the findings of our decade long research study focused on grazing and prescribed fire techniques to manage native prairies for both agricultural production and ecological benefits.

The pasture walk was led by Dr. Ryan Sensenig, Professor of practice at the University of Notre Dame, Dr. Jonathon Schramm, Goshen College's Biology Department Chair and Merry Lea's Farm Manager, Ruth Mischler at the Glacial Retreat Center. Thank you to Camille Sczerbowics of Resilient Indiana, Martin Franke, Director of the LaGrange County Soil and Water Conservation District, and all the pasture walk participants for their engagement and support of this innovative regional collaboration.



MASTER STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

From February through August, Merry Lea launched our first Master Stewardship program, bringing together adults interested in learning how to become better stewards of the land around them. Through classroom sessions and field trips, participants explored ecological restoration, best management practices and how to develop a thoughtful plan for caring for a property.

Throughout the program, participants gained hands-on knowledge and skills while learning from Merry Lea staff and connecting with local stewardship resources and communities. Each participant also developed a written management plan for a property of their choice, putting their new knowledge into practice.

The program wrapped up with capstone presentations, giving participants an opportunity to share their plans for their land and what they learned throughout this experience. The next cohort will begin February 2027! To learn more, email Freya at freyakb@goshen.edu.

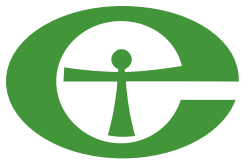
STEWARDSHIP VOLUNTEERS - INVASIVE SPECIES REMOVAL

Thank you to all of our stewardship volunteers who have been helping Freya, our Natural Resources Manager, with cattail wicking to protect and restore our wetland ecosystems! Narrow-leaf and hybrid cattails can spread rapidly and, in certain situations, outcompete native wetland plants. Managing them is no easy task; wetland soils can be muddy and uneven, and the work needs to be done during the summer months when temperatures and humidity are often high. Wicking is a targeted weed control method. Volunteers wipe systemic herbicide directly onto invasive plants using a saturated wick or glove, keeping nearby native plants and open water safe.

Pictured on the right is an aerial view of the area our volunteers have been working on. Can you spot the "strips"? Those are the areas where cattails have been wicked! We're excited to watch this area slowly transform as restoration continues and native wetland plants have more opportunities to thrive.



Photo Credit: Mark East



Merry Lea

Environmental Learning Center
of Goshen College

1700 S. Main St.
Goshen, IN 46526

NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT 71
GOSHEN, IN 46526

Events

Learn more at: merrylea.goshen.edu

Enchanted Forest

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

WHEN: **October 16 & 17** | 7 – 8:30 p.m.

Come for a night hike by lantern light and meet native Indiana animals. These friendly creatures will talk about their diets, habits and favorite places. Enjoy music and snacks, and end the evening sipping hot cocoa around a campfire.

Cost is \$5 per person, cash preferred. Ages 2 & under are free. Registration is not required. See website for more details!

Produce Swap

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

WHEN: Saturday, **September 26** | 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Join Merry Lea, fellow gardeners, and local growers for our first-ever Produce Swap to exchange the bounty of the season! Harvest your extra produce and trade it with others. The swap will include fresh vegetables, herbs, flowers and home-preserved foods.

Cost is free. Registration not required. See website for more details!

Full Moon Hike

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

WHEN: Saturday, **September 26** | 7:30 – 9:30 p.m.

Experience Merry Lea by the light of the Full Corn Moon. We will learn lunar facts as we traverse the trails around the Farmstead by moonlight. As we explore, our senses will guide us through the evening. All ages are welcome, though please note the trails are uneven and not suitable for strollers.

Cost is \$7 per adult, \$5 per child. Registration is required.

Homeschool Family Day - Field Trip

WHERE: Learning Center, 2388 S 500 W, Albion, IN 46701

WHEN: Tuesday, **October 13** | 9:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.

This is a field trip day held for homeschool students and their families. This session is Nature's Recyclers and is open to students k-12th grade. Please pack a lunch and water bottle.

Cost is \$6/student, \$3/adult. Children 4 & under are free when accompanied by a paying adult. Registration is required. See website for more details!