



Brown Family Environmental Center

# FIELD NOTES



## Much Ado about Bats

BY EMMA RENEE COFFMAN '22

**It was a cool autumn night** when a few friends and I ventured into a local park after dark. We were armed with nothing but flashlights and a handheld radio. After weaving through the trees, we emerged into a clearing, lit only by the moon and stars above. We walked out into an open, grassy field, closed in by trees on all sides. We all gathered around in a little circle, eagerly watching our friend with the radio as he began to tune it.

He turned the dial back and forth through several frequencies of static before suddenly, a soft sound came through on the radio. We listened in complete silence until we heard it again, this time clear as day: several high-pitched squeaks coming in over the radio's speaker.

We were ecstatic over our discovery. To confirm our findings, we all looked up into the sky. Against the backdrop of stars, it looked like there were several tiny black birds, swooping and circling in the night.

But what we saw and heard that night weren't really birds -- they were bats! These nocturnal mammals spend their nights hunting for insects, and that's exactly what they were doing that night. The squeaks we heard over the radio were actually the bats' way of detecting their prey. Using a technique called "echolocation," they emit high frequency sound waves to locate their food. When the waves come into contact with their prey -- usually insects -- the waves reflect back and let bats know where they are. This noise is usually inaudible to the human ear, but with our small radio, we were able to pick up the sound on its transmitter.

After my magical encounter with the amazing little creatures, the cool autumn nights grew colder and colder until the chill of winter arrived in full force. Remembering that night in the clearing, I began to wonder: what would those little bats do in the wintertime, when all those bugs they hunted disappeared? Would they hibernate, migrate or somehow fend for themselves against the cold and desolate winter?

Turns out, the answer isn't so cut-and-dried. A lot of factors contribute to what a bat may do in the wintertime. There are many species of bats in the United States (with 11 common species in Ohio alone), and their seasonal habits are just as diverse as their population.

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**There are 11 common species of bat in Ohio: Indiana bats (pictured), northern long-eared bats, Rafineque's big-eared bats, little brown bats, big brown bats, eastern small-footed bats, and tri-colored bats, which are known to hibernate; and eastern red bats, hoary bats, evening bats, and silver-haired bats, which tend to migrate. All 11 species are declining and protected under Ohio law.**

It is common to see large flocks of birds flying south for the winter, but it may come as a surprise that some bats will do the same. Some species of bats can and do migrate. Bats that tend to live in trees and depend on insects for food will make the trek, as their usual habitats in the branches will become far less inviting in the cold. In warmer regions, trees and insects are plentiful, so migrating makes a lot of sense.

Other bats, known as “cave-dwellers,” choose to stay. From late October until April, some Ohio bats hibernate through the season by entering into a state of torpor, an energy-conserving sleep that can last anywhere from a few hours to almost a month. In this state, bats decrease their bodies’ energy needs by about 98%, and their hearts only beat 10 times per minute. This allows them to survive the cold, even when temperatures drop below freezing. The locations bats choose to hibernate tend to be caves, mines, or rocky crevices, safe from the elements. The locations they choose are called “hibernacula.”

Bats face many more threats than deciding what to do when the weather gets cold. One of their largest threats today is known as white nose syndrome, a disease that has infected millions of bats from the northeastern to central regions of the United States. Its namesake comes from the white fungus that can appear on the bats’ noses, face, and ears as a result of the sickness. Because the disease thrives in cold, dark places, bats that hibernate and roost in caves and mines are particularly vulnerable to falling ill. With challenges like this, populations in Ohio and across the United States are declining.

Another big problem for bats can be finding a safe place to roost. Due to habitat loss, bat species are having trouble looking for safe places to take shelter in the warm months and hibernate in the winter.

Due to these threats, every Ohio bat population is on the decline. The Ohio Division of Wildlife has listed all of our bats as requiring special protection, and two of our species — northern long-eared bats and Indiana bats — are also listed as protected by federal law. This means that killing bats or disrupting their roosts (especially in early spring, when they reproduce) is illegal. As private citizens, we clearly have a personal responsibility to be conscious about the way we treat bats.

But besides abiding by these laws, what else can we do? It is probably rare for most of us to encounter bats in the wild (unless you go looking for them with a flashlight and radio), so, realistically, what can we be doing in our own lives to help bats?

With increasing habitat loss, it is unfortunately pretty common for bats to find their way into our attics or homes. For us, then, one of the best ways for us to help them is to learn how to prevent and handle that situation:

1. Bat-proof your home. This includes closing any openings that can let bats sneak in. This can be a pretty difficult process, considering that all it takes is a quarter-inch hole in a structure for a little bat to get in, but to do it yourself is possible. Using steel wool or caulking, you should close up any holes larger than a quarter-inch from wiring, window panels, doors, and chimneys.

2. Put out a bat box. While creating a new cave or mine for wintertime hibernation isn’t a realistic goal, we can still give bats a lovely summer home instead. For the warmer parts of the year, consider putting out a bat box in your yard. These small structures take up very little space and effort, but they can give much-needed shelter to bats returning from hibernation or migration in the spring. A single bat box, installed properly and in a good location, can house over 100 bats. For more information on building or buying a bat box, visit the Bat Conservation International website. They also provide a helpful list of roost protection strategies.

3. If a bat enters your home, take care and seek advice from an expert. Even with all these efforts, sometimes bat-proofing and alternative roosts aren’t enough to keep bats from taking refuge in your home. If opening a door or window did them to leave on their own does not work, be cautious trying to remove one yourself. Handling or being too close to bats comes with some risks: sometimes they can carry diseases harmful to humans (like histoplasmosis or rabies), and killing or removing roosting bats is illegal due to their protected status. Things get even trickier in the wintertime, as it may be far too cold to just release them back outside. For these reasons, it’s usually a good idea to contact experts for advice. If you are in Ohio, you can contact the Ohio Division of Wildlife at 1-800-WILDLIFE for more guidance on removing the bat or bats safely and legally.

And finally, the most important action you can take:

4. Learn and teach others why we should care about bats. Especially here in Ohio, we need bats. Our agriculture and farmland benefit greatly from local bat populations. As insectivores, they are the natural predators of insects that can damage crops. A thriving bat population is therefore a very effective form of pest control. With their help, Ohio farmland can thrive while farmers save resources and effort. If you can help others see how beneficial bats are, there is a good chance they’ll want to help, too.

While there is still much to be done, I see a bright future for Ohio’s bats. Just last year, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine recognized just how important they are to our state. He proclaimed the last week of October as Bat Week to help raise awareness as part of a much larger international effort to conserve and protect bat species.

Personally, I won’t be waiting until next October to celebrate Bat Week. I’ll be spending my winter learning more so I can take action with the arrival of spring when all our bats return from their migrations and awake from their caves. Whether it’s building a bat box or just tuning in to hear their echolocation squeaks on a handheld radio, there is so much that we can do about bats.



# How to Enjoy Winter (Even When You Don't)

BY ABBY NAVIN '23

**With winter upon us**, it can be tricky to find the motivation to be outside as the temperature continues to drop. For most of my life I resented the cold, but in recent years I've found a new appreciation for it, and maybe you can, too. The best way to not only survive but truly enjoy winter is to face it head-on.

My first recommendation would be to go on a hike with a friend. This is a great method if you'd like to stay warm and enjoy the company of a new or old pal. On the hike, I always recommend trying to identify animal tracks. It's a fun skill to have, and it can take you places that you normally wouldn't see. While I know it's easy to lose motivation for exercise, it's important to stay active and go outside -- if not to stay fit, then to fend off cabin fever.

If hiking sounds too intense for you, maybe try a photography walk. Taking photographs can be a great way to get more acquainted with your surroundings, and it can even spark a new appreciation for the colder months. It seems that when animals head into hibernation and humans hole up in their homes, nature is left quiet and still. I know the more I look for what to photograph, the more beauty I see in mundane and seemingly

simple objects, like a leafless tree. Each winter, I find myself gravitating toward photographing birds, particularly cardinals. Their red feathers contrasting against white snow always makes for a beautiful photo. You can even put out a bird feeder to attract and photograph different species.

If you are feeling brave enough, there is nothing like stargazing during the winter. Sitting outside under the night sky is enjoyable during any month, but the experience is unmatched when done on the coldest days. My favorite constellation to look for is Scorpius, since at the heart of the scorpion lies the brightest star, Antares. I personally find stargazing to be a great time to think about all the things that bring me joy and the moments still to come. No matter what thoughts come to your head, just enjoy the brisk air on your skin and the knowledge that you can head back to warmth at any time.

While there is no right way to enjoy winter, I hope these ideas can help foster a stronger relationship with Earth even during these cold times. And if you happen to be near the BFEC, it's the perfect location to try any of these activities.

## Birds of Winter in Central Ohio

BY SARAH PAZEN '22

**While every spring** we've come to love the return of so many migratory birds back to our nature preserve and backyards, there are many birds that stay with us through the winter months and frequent our birdfeeders across central Ohio. Some birds, such as the downy and red-bellied woodpeckers and the American goldfinch, stay year-round here in the midwest without migrating to warmer climates. Others, like the pine siskin and the American tree sparrow, visit us only in the winter.

Although winter bird watching presents the challenges of shorter days and fewer bird species, it also presents the potential for spotting some of Ohio's more unique birds. Keep an eye out for flocks of dapper horned larks and snow buntings foraging for discarded corn and grit along snow-cleared roads and nearby farms in the harsher, colder months like January.

Smaller birds are most attracted to backyard feeders. Look for chickadees, yellow-rumped warblers and other species gathering together to eat. While the need to feed birds year-round is hotly debated, doing so is most beneficial during harsh weather conditions, migration periods, and times when natural seed sources are depleted. If you choose to feed birds during the winter, look for birdseed that includes combinations of nyjer and black-oil sunflower seeds, white proso millet, or medium-sized cracked corn. These types of birdseed contain high levels of fat and protein and are small and accessible enough for smaller birds to eat. The BFEC offers high quality, nutritious birdseed that's perfect for attracting birds to your feeders at home. To order or inquire about pricing, call 740-427-5052, or email Jill Kerkhoff at [kerkhoffj@kenyon.edu](mailto:kerkhoffj@kenyon.edu).



Photo: Luke Hester '20

# Winter's Hidden Gems: Medicinal and Edible Plants

BY LUCY WHITE '23

**Winter marks the end of the cycle of seasons**, life slows down as growth gives way to decay and we wait out the dull, overcast days. In Ohio, the change is especially harsh; the slowly wilting, fall landscape finally surrenders to the frost as barren trees and shriveled plants settle into a long cold season. But this is only a small piece of nature's winter story, and what you often don't see when walking through the cold is that the seemingly sterile earth is often actually brimming with lively roots of winter plants ready to pop up or blossom or seed at just the right time.

Keeping spirits up in the heart of winter can be especially difficult as the heavy cold creates a thick layer of separation between us and the natural world. Luckily, these winter plants not only bring brightness and comfort to an otherwise dismal environment, but many also contain a multitude of medicinal and edible uses that can provide extra solace in the dead of winter. Learning about these plants' histories, cooking with them, and harnessing their healing qualities into tinctures and concoctions, are all valuable ways of getting in touch with the natural world — and all can be done in the comfort of your home.

Before we go any further, I must point out that one must have excellent plant identification skills in order to study the medicinal value of plants. And even if you are able to properly identify the plants mentioned in this article (many plants have deadly look-alikes), there is often a fine line between medicinal and poisonous. The information provided below is meant to inspire curiosity. Do not try any of these suggestions without proper training. Find a certified herbalist to study under.

With that disclaimer in mind, I am going to delve into the histories, mystical qualities and uses of three of my favorite winter plants that can be found right here in Ohio: common witch hazel, chickweed, and snowdrops.

## Common Witch Hazel *Hamamelis virginiana*

Staying true to its name, common witch hazel often seems to verge into the magical, bringing a small bit of charm to the hard winter months. The shrub, native to North America, is hard to miss: it has multiple thin trunks with smooth grey bark that grow from a single point in a twisted cluster up to 20 feet tall. The twisted trunks can create strange, otherworldly configurations. Some plants begin blooming in October, and a winter hiker can often find witch hazels blooming into January. Against the dull grey winter backdrop, the shrub's bright yellow flowers resemble spidery flames that burst out with long fringed petals. The flowers radiate a sweet, citrusy smell.

In addition to its distinct characteristics, common witch hazel has an extensive history of medicinal use in many different communities. The plant contains anti-inflammatory and astringent compounds, called tannins, that reduce swelling and fight bacteria. North Americans and native Americans were the first people on this continent to harness the healing powers of the plant; each tribe had distinct traditional uses for the plant. The Potawatomi tribe used witch hazel in their sweat lodges to ease sore muscles, the Osage made compresses of witch hazel bark to ease skin ulcers and sores, and the Iroquois tribe used dried leaves to make a tea to soothe sore throats, colds and diarrhea. The plant wasn't popularized in the colonial U.S. until Thomas Dickinson acquired the knowledge of witch hazel's qualities from Native Americans and began commodifying the plant into a popular concoction of witch hazel and alcohol. The plant's bark, leaves and flowers are still commonly made into teas and tinctures to heal skin, clean wounds, and soothe burns and sore throats.



## Chickweed *Stellaria media*

Chickweed is notorious for being a pesky weed. After it was introduced from Europe, its native home, it spread prolifically throughout the entire United States, where it has since become naturalized. The plant's high resilience and affinity for cultivated areas allows this plant to quickly spread through gardens and lawns and take over other plants and crops. But this reputation as a weed tends to overlook all of its other wonderful qualities. This seemingly underwhelming plant is in fact one of the tastiest and most comforting winter plants. As it begins to appear in the fall, it remains fairly inconspicuous. It grows low to the ground in thick clusters, creating a carpet of tiny green oval leaves. In early spring it blooms with small white daisy-like flowers. The dainty blossoms are, in themselves, a delightful addition to the late winter/early spring landscape, but the real power of chickweed lies in its taste and medicinal value.

Chickweed is extremely rich in minerals like copper, zinc, calcium, and iron and high in vitamins A, B and C. It also contains saponins, which facilitate nutrient absorption. These properties make the plant one of the more effective natural folk remedies that has been used throughout history to treat a variety of ailments like swollen glands, poor digestion, wounds, thyroid problems, arthritis and sore muscles. The plant is also entirely edible, and its high nutritious content and subtle non-bitter taste make it a wonderful and healthy addition to many foods and recipes. Its flowers, seed pods, stems and leaves can all be eaten raw just like other sprouts and lettuces. It is a tasty addition to salads, soups, pizza and sandwiches. My personal favorite, however, is a bright, citrusy chickweed pesto.



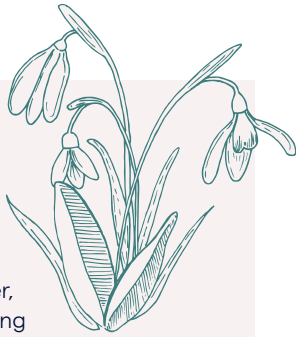
# Winter Processions

BY LUKE HESTER '20, BFEC POST-BACCALAUREATE FELLOW

## Snowdrops *Galanthus sp.*

The blossoming of snowdrop flowers typically marks the coming end of winter, a small sign that spring is upon us. These small dainty plants are native to Europe and southwestern Asia but have spread abundantly throughout the eastern United States. They only grow only three to six inches tall but they should not be underestimated. By mid-March, the small white flowers dangle from the top of the short drooping stem like falling snowflakes. These white, bell-shaped flowers add life to a barren landscape and when planted en masse create the illusion of a winter wonderland.

Though snowdrops contain medicinal properties and are commercially used, ingesting snowdrops without medical guidance is extremely dangerous and even deadly. But in the hands of trained herbalists, this plant has a long and fascinating history of treating medical conditions, dating back to ancient times. It is believed that the flower that Odysseus ate to break Circe's mind-bending spell in Homer's "The Odyssey" was the snowdrop. However, it was not until the 1950s that a team of scientists in Bulgaria discovered its groundbreaking medical properties. They found that the plant contains the alkaloid galantamine, which improves brain function. In 2001, the FDA approved a drug made from the extracts of the snowdrop flower to treat memory loss conditions like dementia and Alzheimer's, which is still commonly used to this day.



Illustrations: Katelyn Ratajczak

**During the course of an average busy day**, even in remote Gambier, one will see the flow of people going about their way. Usually, we do not stop and think about these processions of people. Instead, we flow with them, perhaps not giving much thought regarding this walk. But the walk itself can be just as important as the destination, if given enough attention. By definition a true procession is a group of people walking in a formal and oftentimes ceremonial manner. A major purpose of such processions in a liturgical setting is to establish a reverent atmosphere and spirit towards the event. In wintertime, when less folks are out joining the greater daily procession, perhaps we can reflect upon this definition of walking to aid our relationship with the natural world.

In the natural world, many animals participate in processions despite the cold. Some of them, such as groundhogs, will find their way into a burrow. Here they will drop their heart rate and hibernate to sit out the cold. Many others, however, stay active, and continue to search for food during the colder months. These animals will often use the same paths as other members of their species making a run, such as a deer run. Hiking trails such as those found at the Brown Family Environmental Center can serve as our runs to follow in the footsteps of many before us.

There are many benefits to participating in this larger procession for ourselves. As the definition of a procession explains, it can help instill a reverent mindset toward nature. We can transition the purpose of the walk away from a simple form of transportation into an experience during which we observe these natural phenomena. Similar to how an animal will find its query along its winter walks, a long walk might help us realize our place among all of these other animals. And what may our query be? To spot some of these animals on their trails, perhaps. Or maybe to hear some unique sounds such as their paws hitting the cold ground or a barred owl calling. The silence of winter provides plenty of opportunity to focus on specific sounds.

If we want to go out and join the natural processions, we must prepare for safely traversing the outdoors during cold weather. A fox, for example, grows thicker fur to stay warm. For us, clothing is the most important feature. A three-layer system is a good rule to follow. I might wear the red long-johns my grandpa got me, aka a base layer that helps to wick moisture away when you perspire. Then I would suggest a mid-layer for insulation and a top-layer for keeping moisture and wind out. Dry clothes can be a useful addition to a backpack, too. From there I would plan to wear my wool socks and boots, not too tight, and gloves, hat, etc. Gear varies based upon the length of the walk, but there are a number of essentials. I will not spend much time discussing these in detail, but food, water, and navigation tools are all a necessity, even for a short walk on trails.

I am excited to see what the trails hold for me and to solemnly recognize my place among all of the natural processions. I hope to see you all out there, joining this greater procession of all of the winter creatures.

Please keep in mind that the information provided in this article does not serve as professional medical advice, but rather a short introduction to the vast world of medicinal and edible herbs. **If you wish to pursue the study of medicinal plants, please find a trained herbalist to guide you.**



## GREEN CORNER

# Looking Toward Our Future: Greenhouse Gas Emissions During COVID-19

BY DAVE HEITHAUS '99, DIRECTOR OF GREEN INITIATIVES

As we move from 2020 into this new year, we can feel a mix of hope and trepidation in the air. Individual, societal and planetary health are all on the docket labelled “this is bleeping urgent”.

An interesting side effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant if temporary drop in greenhouse gas emissions. With shifts in energy use and significant travel restrictions, many of the planet’s largest emitters slowed beginning in late March. Before you break out the champagne, please realize that these short-term trends will have no meaningful impact on climate change and are already reversing with renewed human activity. They will need to be sustained and deepened if we are to do what is required to maintain the planet as one friendly to life as we know it. What these dips can do, however, is illustrate a sobering reality about what intentional rather than crisis-induced progress might look like.

Estimates vary, but the most optimistic one show as much as a 30% decrease in greenhouse gas emissions over a short period of time during the peak of the lockdowns. To achieve that 30%, the world economy

ground to a halt, travel between and within nations was severely restricted and people’s lives were disrupted to a degree unseen since World War II. All of that, for a 30% reduction over a short period of time. It’s almost inconceivable to picture what things would have looked like if we had eliminated the remaining emissions required to halt our world’s accelerating warming.

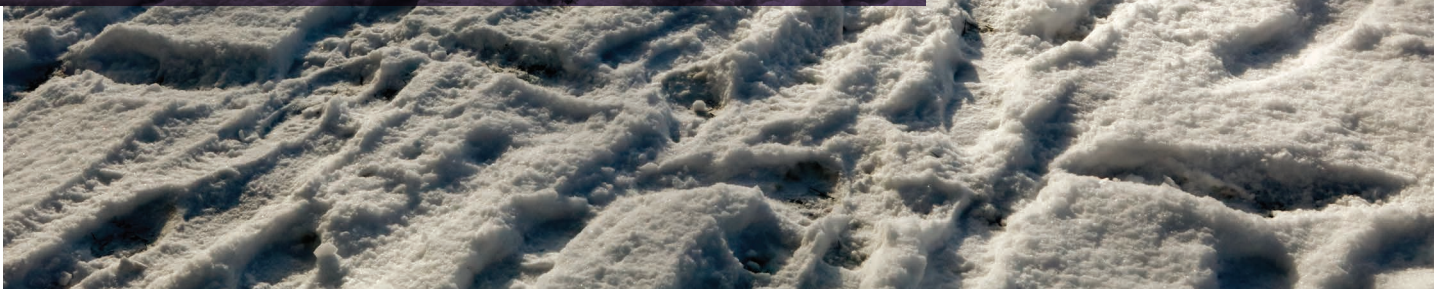
This is not intended to depress, but it is a call for alarm and some urgent and creative thinking. As we begin to see what a long-term pandemic recovery looks like, now is the time to incorporate intentional, sustained shifts in energy use and transportation at local, state and national levels. Realistically, life as we have lived it may no longer be possible if we are to rise to the occasion. What solutions might we find to optimize function and comfort while steadily reducing our impact on climate change? As Kenyon embarks on a new phase of long-term planning, bold strategies will certainly be discussed. Let us hope that they will also be modeled.



## PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

This winter and spring, the Brown Family Environmental Center will host minimal public programs. When programs are planned, they will be posted to the BFEC website, [bfec.kenyon.edu](http://bfec.kenyon.edu). Watch the website, or join our email list to receive notifications.

In the meantime, the BFEC trail system is open. Get some exercise and fresh air on our nine miles of trails through a variety of ecosystems.



# VOLUNTEERS AND DONORS

FALL 2020

Throughout the year, generosity from our donors supports all of our mission-based initiatives. During the months of August, September and October, our donors (listed below) enabled us to build another boardwalk along a soggy portion of trail, make a serious start on our new nature play trail, purchase trees that will be planted around the property, and provide art supplies to the Pleasant Street Elementary third grade class for several art and nature virtual workshops led by our post-baccalaureate fellow, Luke Hester. Memorial gifts for Alex Levy '20 and Robert Koretz '82 have added a beautiful tulip tree and bench on the property.

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*In memory of*  
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*In memory of*  
*Alex Levy '20*  
Isaiah Stavchansky along  
with Alex's family and  
many other friends

*In memory of*  
*Robert Ira Koretz '82*  
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    Robert Dickerman

Our volunteers continue to work tirelessly to help us fulfill our mission. In October, November and December, volunteers worked 164 hours in all kinds of weather to pull invasive species, build our new nature play trail, write our new bird field guide, make improvements to our bluebird trail and so much more.

Veronica de Pascuale,  
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**OUR MISSION**

The Brown Family Environmental Center exists to support the academic goals of Kenyon College, to provide opportunities for education and research, to engage Central Ohioans of all ages with nature, and to conserve the natural diversity of the Kokosing River valley.

**OUR STAFF**

**Luke Hester '20**, *Post Baccalaureate Fellow*  
**Mabel Jones '21**, *Student Newsletter Editor*  
**Jill Kerkhoff**, *Facilities Coordinator and Office Administrator*  
**Shane McGuire**, *Land Manager Naturalist*  
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