



# Taft Times

Spring 2018

Northern Illinois University Lorado Taft Field Campus

Oregon, IL

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## The Power of Outdoor Education

I truly believe that outdoor education can be a magical, life-changing experience. Something about the fresh air and surrounding beauty allows us to relax both physically and mentally. We can form deeper relationships with our peers and teachers because there is nothing to distract us from just being present and in the moment. Small groups allow for more personalized attention and risk taking that might be just a little too embarrassing to otherwise try at school in front of the whole class. One of these powerful moments occurred on an outdoor education trip that, without a doubt, positively changed the life of a young girl.

Before the students arrived, the teachers told me how extremely shy one of their students was. She only spoke when she wanted to, so I should never call on her if she did not raise her hand. Calling on her un-expectantly would leave her frozen in fear. When she would say something, her volume was a quiet whisper. Initially, her experience at Taft played out exactly how the teachers described. However, on the last night here, the school went on night hikes and everything changed.

One game that we played was bat and moth. The game involves one student wearing a blindfold, acting as a bat, and another pretending to be a moth. The other students form a circle to contain the bat and moth and create boundaries. The goal is for the bat to find and tag the moth using a technique similar to echolocation. In the game, the bat says the word “bat” and the “echo” comes from the moth saying the word “moth.” I asked the moth to respond equally as loud as the bat.

We played a few rounds, switching out the students who were the bat and moth. Then the shyest girl volunteered to be the moth. The blindfolded bat said, “Bat,” and to everyone’s surprise, the moth responded in an equally loud voice, “Moth!” The bat was so surprised at the sound and volume of her voice, he was convinced another student had responded instead. It was, in fact, her voice! Everyone there was so proud of her. The previous support that came from her peers in repeating her answers loud enough for everyone to hear and encouraging her to speak in paired discussions paid off. After just a few days, that group was able to help everyone feel incredibly comfortable and encourage each other to try new things. Teachers later confirmed that the young girl came out of her shell on a magical outdoor education trip.





## Prescribed Burn on the Prairie

Early this April we performed a prescribed burn on some of our prairie near the instincts field. Fire is an important part of a prairie ecosystem, allowing old growth to be cleared away and making room for new growth. Although it may look devastating to watch a fire move through a prairie, the plants are able to survive. This is because most of a prairie plant is underground in the roots that, in some species, can reach 20 feet deep. Some species of plants will thrive only after a fire. Certain seeds will only germinate after fire and some plants need clearings to grow. Fire also deters woody plants from growing and allows the prairie plants to thrive.

A prairie does not need a fire to occur every year, but a regular cycle of fire is important. For many years people thought that fire was a bad thing for an ecosystem and this has led to a build up of fuel and more extreme wildfires in some parts of the country. By having regular prescribed burns, much of that excess fuel is burned, leading to a healthier ecosystem.

Because grass burns so quickly, a prescribed prairie burn does not take long. The fire looks like a moving wave as it creeps through the prairie. Animals that had been hiding in the grass will quickly run out. When the fire is over, the black left behind is a perfect basking spot for snakes, and the plants grow back quickly, giving other animals cover. Although we think of fire as a destructive force for nature, it is a sign of rebirth and new opportunities in a never ending cycle. Thanks to the Byron Forest Preserve District for their assistance in our prairie burn.

## Welcome Back Katie



We are excited to welcome back a familiar face to our education team. We asked Katie a few questions and here are her answers:

1. What is your spirit animal?  
A bear because they sleep all winter, like berries and are fuzzy.
2. What is your favorite color?  
Purple.
3. If you could have any superpower what would it be?  
Invisibility, because it would be fun to randomly appear.
4. Where would you want to travel to if you could?  
Australia, because it would be fun to see kangaroos, dingoes and the Great Barrier Reef.



## Snake Boards Return to Taft this Spring

When spring returns to Taft, animals that have spent the winter lying dormant in hibernation return to being active. This includes chipmunks and bats, as well as some hard to find reptiles and amphibians. Many of these animals are extremely secretive and well-camouflaged, making it very difficult for people to find them. Even experienced scientists can walk right past a well-hidden snake, frog, lizard, or salamander and never know it.

Fortunately, there is one particular method of locating reptiles and amphibians that is both easy and reliable: snake boards. A snake board is simply a large piece of untreated plywood that is left out in an open sunny spot in early spring until about mid-summer. When the sun shines on the wood, it causes the underside to heat up, creating a warm and dark hiding spot for snakes. Snakes (and other small animals) gather under the boards to take advantage of the extra warmth. You can easily find the snakes by simply turning the board over. This method is used by professional herpetologists (people who study reptiles and amphibians) all over the world, and is now being done at Taft.

Last spring was the first year that snake boards were put out at Taft, and the results were promising. In just a few short weeks, we found dozens of snakes. Most were common garter snakes, the most abundant species in northern Illinois. However, also found were a milk snake and a brown snake. Both of which are relatively common, but extremely secretive and difficult to find.

Having the snake boards at Taft has been a good way to provide our students with a memorable introduction to some of the animals that call the campus home and an opportunity to demonstrate one method scientists use to learn about wildlife. The snake boards have been returned this spring, and we continue to look for more reptile visitors all over campus.



# THE ZERO ORT REPORT!!!

16	Warren	South (East)
	Daniel Wright	South (West)
12	Steward x2	Thomas (Gamma)
	Washington x5	Thomas (Delta) x3
8	Pleasantdale	Metro Prep
	Isaac Fox	Harper
4	Beaupre x4	St. Francis
	Sarah Adams x2	Casals x5
0	May Whitney x2	
	Spencer Loomis	

Congratulations to all of our schools who got zero ort for at least one meal while at Lorado Taft! Many schools were very close, and we know the students worked really hard to achieve their goals. We hope that the idea of zero ort is something your students take with them back to school to share with their families and friends.

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## Winter/Spring Highlights



### Contributing Authors:

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