

Taft Times

Winter 2015

Northern Illinois University

Lorado Taft Field Campus

Oregon, IL

Species Spotting

The Tom Crew



The wild turkey, standing 3-4 feet tall and weighing in at 5-20 pounds is a majestic and interesting bird. Here at Taft, we have a flock of male turkeys that love to roam the campus on a daily basis. This turkey boys club is almost like a part of our family. Endearingly called the “tom crew” by some, they seem to know their way around campus quite well, giving many Taft visitors a sight to see, some laughs, and puzzling looks. They seem to always be around to give many guests a good laugh or peak some curiosity

about their beautiful colors, or the interesting way that they walk.

The tom crew has adapted to life on campus very well, even adjusting to our schedule! The echoing ring from the dinner bell seems to be the warning for turkeys to head for the hills, as they know that there will soon be masses of children heading that way. The turkey boys make their regular run to the birding area in the quiet early morning and early evening hours, where they feast on bird seed dropped under the feeders. (Based on observations, the cracked corn is their favorite.)

Many of our younger guest enjoy looking at the turkey tracks or just casually seeing them pass by during class. All in all, we are very lucky to have our tom crew here, especially since turkeys almost faced extinction from the early Europeans. Often times, kids get very wide eyed when we have our phenomenal turkey dinner, thinking that we are eating our beloved friends. Not to worry though, we will not be consuming the tom crew any time soon. Hopefully the legacy of the tom crew lives on here at Taft, and they will be seen for many years.

Wolves Back in Illinois

With more and more confirmed sightings in Illinois, the wolf population is on the rise. There have been nine confirmed sightings between 2000 and October 2014. Most have been seen in the Northwest corner of the state with a few exceptions in Lake, Marshall, and Pike counties. The most recent spotting that was noted occurred in Jo Daviess County in February of 2013. All reported sightings had been of lone wolves with no indication of pack activity until recently when a male and female were spotted together. As of February 20th 2015, the Gray Wolf has been moved to the endangered species list for parts of Illinois and Iowa, and are still listed as endangered by the federal government.

When comparing wolves to coyotes, wolves are generally much larger. Male wolves average over 100lbs and are usually about 33” tall at the shoulder. Male coyotes range from 15 to 46lbs and are only 25” at the shoulder. When tracking, the footprints of the gray wolf are often 3.5-4” wide while the coyote’s is roughly 2.5”. The distinguishing feature, however, is the head. Wolves have a much wider and bulkier head, while the coyote’s is narrower and longer.

- <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2015-02-20/pdf/2015-03503.pdf>
- http://www.dnr.illinois.gov/ESPB/Documents/ET_by_County.pdf
- http://dnr.wi.gov/news/images/slideshows/Wolf_Coyote_Comparison/



New at Taft

Taft's Comparative Anatomy Lab Launches

“Have you ever found a bone in the woods? Have you ever wondered what animal it came from, what happened to it, how it got there? What can one bone tell us?” So begins



the inquiry of our newest osteology-inspired ecology class.

After an extensive sorting of multiple bone collections, we've put our new microscopes and curiosity to work on a comparative anatomy laboratory class. During this unique experience, students may learn to identify the species of an animal from its bones, assess the approximate age of an animal by examining growth plates, as well as make educated guesses about the animal's health, and even its cause of death. It's forest forensics!

Students (grades 5-7) are invited to examine and document observations of two dozen real bone specimens (everything from a mink to a horse!), applying their best lab techniques and professionalism to the cause. After filling out a detailed worksheet, they are invited to share their conclusions and questions with their fellow students.



Studying animal bones with a comparative approach deepens our understanding of our own bodies, and is part of what connects us with the web of life and death around us in the natural world. This class may work especially well as an introduction or reinforcement of lab techniques, microscope use, and dissection.

New Tools: Microscopes



Thanks to funding from NIU's Division of Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development, we have purchased compound and stereo microscopes from the Scope Shoppe in DeKalb. The

staff is very excited to use them in as many classes as possible. Many teachers have also been excited, since it is a good opportunity to tie our traditional Taft outdoor classes with the common core or STEM curriculum.

So far, we have used the microscopes to examine bones, fur, and a wasp nest in our new osteology class. Geology classes have also included the microscopes to take a closer look at rocks. We are especially eager for the spring time when water ecology will resume and macroinvertebrates are active again. The stereo microscopes can be a really valuable tool in helping students identify the critters that they find. Talk to your Taft coordinator if you want to use or have other ideas for using microscopes in your next class.

New Staff



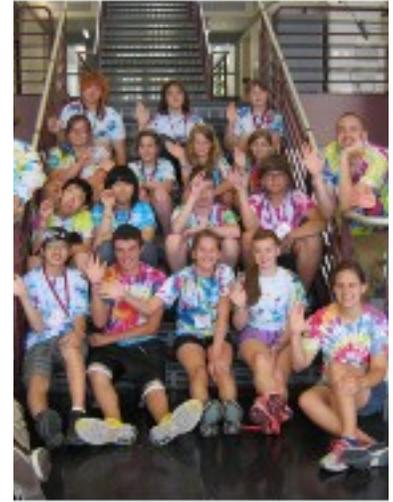
Garrett Greely

Favorite Book: The Power of One
Taft Choice Class: Cookie Mining
Birthplace: Lexington, Kentucky



STEM Camps at Taft This Summer!

NIU's STEM Outreach program will be holding camps at Lorado Taft Campus this summer. July 5-10 camps include Exploring STEM Through Art, Exploring STEM Through Engineering, Exploring STEM Through Nature, and Exploring STEM through LEGO EV3 Robotics: Space. All are for grade levels 6-9. July 12-17 camps have some of the same themes and also include an art themed camp for 9-12 graders. Other STEM focused camps will be going on throughout the summer at NIU's main campus in DeKalb, as well. For more information or to complete the camp application, visit the STEM Outreach website at <http://www.niu.edu/stem/programs/camps/index.shtml>, or contact Jeremy Benson at jjbenenson@niu.edu or 815-753-0533.



Nature Myths

Interesting “facts” that many people will swear are true but aren’t.

Moss grows on the north side of trees

Technically true, however, it is also true that moss grows on the south, east, and west sides of trees. Moss like wet, cool places to grow. In some areas, such as parts of Alaska and Canada, the weather patterns and sunlight allow for a small microclimate to exist around the northern side of trees, resulting in a slightly better environment for moss and lichen to grow. As a result, in the northern hemisphere, we are more likely to see moss and lichen on the northern sides of trees. This rule does not hold true for most of the rest of the planet though. Using the sun or stars as a guideline for finding directions is a much more accurate way of reckoning direction if you don’t have a compass on you.

(<http://www.naturalnavigator.com/the-library/the-truth-about-moss>)

Snakes tunnel in the ground

Many times I have been hiking with kids when we come across a hole in the ground. Inevitably, someone will declare it to be a “snake-hole”. How can a snake dig a hole without any sort of arms, legs, or other appendages to dig with? This myth has, no doubt, arisen from people who have witnessed snakes entering or emerging from holes in the ground, or from people who have dug up a nest of brumating garter snakes. The truth is that snakes frequently use the abandoned tunnels and dens of various burrowing creatures. Sometimes snakes enter these holes seeking to eat those burrowing creatures. They cannot, however, dig tunnels themselves.

(<http://animals.pawnation.com/identify-snake-holes-ground-7886.html>)

Bumblebees can’t sting

I myself can debunk this myth through firsthand experience! Bumblebees may seem slow, clumsy, and friendly, but they can still defend themselves when needed. Bumblebees do, however, tend to be less quick to provocation than many species of bees & wasps. They are also larger in size which increases their visibility. In addition, their hives are often built securely underground, where humans are less likely to disturb them. This all leads to fewer instances of people inadvertently angering them and getting stung as a result. Be careful though – they are just as capable of defending themselves as any other bee or wasp, so if they feel threatened, they will sting you to defend themselves (and unlike honeybees, they can sting repeatedly since their stinger is not barbed).

(<http://www.bumblebee.org/faq.htm>)



Nature Myths

Interesting “facts” that many people will swear are true but aren’t.

Ticks will jump out of trees and land in your hair

Many parents send their kids to camp with hats to protect them from ticks as a result of this myth. This myth, no doubt, results from the fact that once ticks are on you, they won’t just bite down right away. Instead, they try and find a warm, hairy, secluded place on the body to settle down and bite in. Your head, therefore, is a prime location for them to crawl to once they get on you. But ticks don’t sit in trees looking for people to jump on to, they simply stay in tall grass or other leafy plants waiting for a human or other warm-blooded animal to brush up against the plant, at which point they crawl onto the unwitting host. Once they are on a host, they crawl around at their leisure (sometimes taking as long as 24 hours), looking for a prime location to bite in and begin feasting.

<http://www.cdc.gov/bam/safety/tick.html>

We want to hear from you!

If you have heard of a nature myth, send it to Jhapner@niu.edu or abanner@niu.edu and you could be included in our next newsletter. Due to its popularity, we are creating a regular reoccurring Nature Myth section! We will select one nature myth to put in each newsletter.

Be in the next newsletter!

Email abanner@niu.edu your best picture of an animal, plant, or fungus that you took on your trip to Taft. Didn’t bring a camera? Send us a drawing of an Illinois species. We will research it and include that in the next newsletter. Don’t forget to include your name, school, and what class you were in that inspired your artwork.

Zero Ort!

Congratulations to the following schools for having ZERO ORT during a meal at Taft!

ZERO ORT for Multiple Meals
St. Thomas of Villanova (4)
Earlville (3)

Dieterich
Francis Parker
Chicago City Day
Latin School

Highland-Gold
Galena
Orangeville
Westmont
Beaupre



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by Kendra Swanson

