



Woodlands

Honoring the Solstice

Winter is the deep, slow breath we all need after the frenzy of warmer months

By Sara Catherine Lichon • Artwork by Lauren Theiss

The mornings lately are quiet. Frost glistens on the ground. The chilly air kisses your nose when you step outside. What birds are still around are slowly hopping around in the leaves, looking for bugs to nibble on. This is the darkest time of the year, but the stars seem to shine their brightest. Everything in nature has settled down, entering a gentler routine. Winter is here.

For centuries, nature's cycles have been reflected in our lives and customs. Nearly all of our ancestors, regardless of what cultural backgrounds we come from, lived their lives by the seasons and celebrated each seasonal shift. Living seasonally was a matter of survival for our ancestors, who used cues from the natural world to know when to plant, grow, harvest, hunt, and forage their food. Living by this seasonal calendar wasn't just for survival, though; it also created a stronger bond between people and nature. As such, the winter solstice has been celebrated throughout history in many different ways by many different cultures. Many of the late-December holidays we celebrate today have their roots in these historic winter solstice celebrations.

By honoring the winter solstice and observing the changes in nature during this season, we can deepen our own connection to the world around us. But how can we lean into this time of year, and absorb the lessons winter has to teach us? To explore this question, we met with Lauren Theiss, the Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA)'s Director of Education, and Chris Neff, the NJ Audubon Society's Director of Communications, at RHA's nature preserve, Fairview Farm.

Despite the winter solstice being the day with the least amount of sunlight, this day has traditionally been celebrated as the sun's rebirth. This solstice signaled to our ancestors that spring was on its way, and soon there would be food to grow and harvest. Since the autumn equinox, each day leading up to this point has gotten shorter. But, after the solstice, the sun is reborn and each day gets lighter. We begin our march towards spring, and soon life will awaken and return again. This turning point in the season is what many cultures celebrated all across the world. Several ancient structures that still stand today give us a glimpse into how impor-

ent this day was – Stonehenge, for example, is aligned with the solstice sunrise, highlighting the moment the sun is reborn over the horizon.

One of the most well-known winter solstice festivals is the Germanic/Norse Yule. To invite the sun to return again, a Yule log would be burnt and feasts would be had. Another ancient celebration was the Roman Saturnalia festival, which honored the god Saturn through revelry and decking the halls with greenery. December 25 was considered to be the birthdate of the Roman sun god, Sol Invictus, and of Mithras, a SWANA (South West Asia/North Africa) cultural god.

Many of our modern holidays center around similar themes of rebirth. Christmas, while not celebrating the birth of the sun, is celebrating the birth of the Son, Jesus. New Year's is a literal new beginning. While Hanukkah's date changes each year based on the lunar calendar, the underlying message remains one of hope for brighter days. Kwanzaa, which combines several African traditions, is rooted in festivals celebrating the start of the agricultural season. Cultures in other parts of the world also celebrate the solstice to this day. During the Persian Shab-e Yalda, families stay up all night, and the next morning is one of festivity for having made it through the longest night of the year. In China, the Dongzhi Festival involves observing the shift from yin

(cold/dark) energy to yang (light/positive) energy.

All of these holidays incorporate lights in some way, as a way to keep the darkest night of the year at bay. We hang Christmas lights on our houses, Hanukkah is the Festival of Lights, and we gather around our fireplaces with loved ones. No matter how you celebrate the winter solstice, all these traditions return back to the patterns in nature during this time of year: we pull our loved ones close as a way to navigate the transition to quiet, darker, colder days, warming ourselves as we wait patiently for spring.

At Fairview Farm, you can find celebration by observing the little happenings of winter. "Ideally, the ground is frozen and there's snow blanketing the landscape," Lauren says as she paints a picture of winter on the preserve. "Snow is so important for the water because it melts into the ground and per-

colates, which replenishes the aquifers." As you walk around the preserve, you can sometimes see animal tracks in the snow, a gift from nature to remind you you're not alone in the cold. Only some animals hibernate in NJ, such as bats, groundhogs, and mice, but most others don't. Not even bears truly hibernate – they go into a state of light rest, and may wake up on warmer days.

When there's snow on the ground you can try tracking these animals, which Lauren does with children who take part in RHA's Tracks and Scat program. "I like to look for how the mice and

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
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voles make little tunnels in the snow. And sometimes, if there's a fox involved, you can see that they follow those tunnels and how they pounce." Lauren will also take her students to Fairy Wood, a space where children let their imaginations lead them. "This is a great way to connect kids to the cycles of the earth, because we might think, 'what are the fairies doing right now in the winter?' How are they keeping warm?" Through imaginative play, you come to a lot of conclusions that are reality."

Stepping out from the trees and looking up to the sky, you may be surprised by how many birds stick around for the winter, such as owls. "They're here all year-round, you just can't see them because of the leaves. They become much more active in winter," Chris explains. "They'll be looking to nest, and if they have young they'll be very active feeding them."

Woodpeckers, ring-neck ducks, wood ducks, mergansers, buffleheads, herons, yellow-rumped warblers, and even bluebirds and robins can also be spotted. "Everyone thinks robins are the first sign of spring, but in the winter, they just conglomerate all together in the woods to forage, probably snuggle together at night for warmth," Lauren says. Similar to our own gatherings with family around the holidays! Several other kinds of birds appear only in winter, migrating from further north. For dark-eyed juncos, NJ is their south-for-the-winter. "The old tale is that the juncos brought the snow with them," adds Chris.

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Even with all this activity, winter is still a time for rest. Frogs and fish go into torpor, when their bodies freeze and heartbeats slow. Plants are in a deep sleep, dry, with only their seeds left, waiting to drop them for spring. "Something I like to do in the winter is make wreaths out of the dried grasses," says Lauren. "And if you're using native plants, all the seedheads are still on. You make your beautiful wreath and hang it up, but then you can just toss it outside and become a vector for the seeds of native plants."

Lauren also spends time illustrating solstice and equinox-themed cards for family and friends as a way to brighten their moods during these long nights. Her whimsical images of forest creatures with their blankets in tiny burrows remind us to rest, just as all of nature is. "You see people get into that winter slump, and you just have to treat it the right way. Take it easy on yourself, allow yourself to slow down. You need to snuggle with a candle and a hot chocolate. It sounds trivial, but it makes a huge difference." Like our ancestors, Lauren recognizes the need for community to come together during winter. "We're all so isolated, then it starts to get dark, and we're depressed. But when you all get together around the warm glow of the campfire, with your community and your people, that's what gets you through."

To bring community together, RHA hosts several of their own winter celebrations in partnership with Friluftsliv Family for 15 weeks of Friluftsliv (a Scandinavian idea that roughly translates



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to "open-air life"). Held throughout winter, these events are similar to all solstice celebrations: surrounding ourselves with light, warmth, and community. Friluftsliv begins with a kick-off party on December 1, with glow-in-the-dark yard games, a campfire, an astronomer, and a winter clothing/gear swap. On January 26 is the Friluftsliv mid-winter gathering, with a full moon hike (see *The BRJ March/April 2023*), campfire, storyteller, and crafts. On March 9, Friluftsliv concludes with a spring equinox celebration, ringing in spring with another campfire, outdoor dancing, and a woodcock, spring ephemerals, and frog hike. And with this arrival of spring, the cycle begins again.

Winter is the deep, slow breath we all need to take, the calm

moments before and after the frenzy of warmer months. Just like nature, we also need this season to rest before the sun is reborn and spring comes again. Like our ancestors before us, let us honor this season and embrace the long, dark nights by gathering with loved ones, lighting a candle, cozying up and preparing for the return of the sun. No matter how you celebrate, feel united in knowing that there's community to be found when we align ourselves to the cycles of nature.

Raritan Headwaters has been working since 1959 to protect, preserve and improve water quality and other natural resources of the Raritan River headwaters region. To learn more, please visit www.raritanheadwaters.org.

