

February Vacation Camp Highlights



February Vacation Camp marked exactly one year since I arrived at MALT; A camp etched into my annual calendar as one of discovery and growth in Vermont's coldest month. After a full year teaching outdoor programs and stewarding MALT lands and trails, I finally found my "classroom". This Magical Kingdom is located in the Southern most portion of Otter Creek Gorge, an amphitheater of old hemlock trees with little to no understory. A gurgling stream only a few feet across meanders around our spot, providing the natural boundary for games and explorations. Head south and you'll find yourself at the caves where fishers tend to sleep and sometime poop. West are the sliding hills and East is the Valley of Forts. This is the only place in the world that is engraved in my mind as well as my childhood pond, and I honestly believe in its magic.

Here are a few memories from the week the MALT staff wants to share with you:

Monday: Campers in groups of 2-3 make their own snowflakes! First sticks and beautiful items of nature such as crispy beech leaves or pine clusters were gathered. After learning a special knot, we wove our snowflakes into existence and made each unique with a special design of forest decorations.

His snowflake in hand, a young camper explained specific directions to his father at pickup "no dad, it HAS to hang OUTSIDE". Perhaps this camper's desire to keep his snowflake outside has to do with his connection to the space in which he created it.



Tuesday: In the cave to the south of our Magical Kingdom, Caleb secretly hid Ferrero Rocher chocolates with the hope, that broken up, they would look like animal scat...an apt disguise for the ultimate trick. Before lunch all hiked to the unexplored cave but with an instructor to enter first, just in case a sleeping carnivore awaited! "Ohhh" exclaimed Jamie, as she peered in. "There is something very special in here". I look around and each campers face is slightly agape with excitement and anticipation. The trick goes on as we discuss scat and how there seems to be pieces of masticated bone in this specific specimen: the mark of a weasel. Jamie explains that a master tracker told her, "If it smells nutty and tastes sweet, it's Fischer scat." Then, with hesitation, Jamie pops a piece of it into her mouth! Campers gasp, some look away, most cannot avert their eyes. Then, Jamie makes a slight noise as she chews and swallows! "I can feel the texture of the masticated bone fragments.

Crunchy.” A brave camper asked to try some, and with immense hesitation, took a nibble. Almost all at once, after a moment of unusual silence, they all start screaming “IT’S A TRICK!!!”



Wednesday: Fire by bow drill in two feet of snow, Pancakes cooked on a cast iron skillet, resting atop the snow-blanketed forest floor, fort construction in Eastern section. Science experiments for nature’s most and least flammable materials and games of Rock, Paper, Scissors, Survivor. I think campers and instructors alike

both felt the magic on this day. In retrospect, all I can remember hearing were chirps of laughter and a baseline tone of relaxation and freedom.



Friday: We braved the cold and met the afternoon sky with excitement in this temperature-adjusted session. As we enjoyed our first snack after a long walk to the east, we read about finding happiness all around us and did just that for the rest of the day. Snow slide construction, fuel collection, and a crackling fire with hot chocolate and marshmallows was the perfect celebration for a week in the woods. We trekked out with snowcatchers, climbing sticks, and one very large piece of bark, all reminders of the magical week in the forest.



High: Low: Buffalo

After each day of camp, MALT instructors debrief with a "High, Low, Buffalo". It is a way to reflect on the day and share what we loved, what we struggled with, and a wild card (the Buffalo). It helps us grow, connect with each other, and improve our mentorship of your curious and energetic kiddos.

Some of our "Highs" included co-telling the story of Rainbow Raven as we celebrated Caleb's successful fire by friction. I felt deeply connected with the kids as they munched on their lunches, warming by the fire, and hearing the story of how Raven brought light and warmth to the earth when the first winter fell upon the animals. Caleb shared a "High" that sticks in my mind, he remembers being frustrated at the windy and cold conditions when he was trying to start an ember with his bowdrill. The kids seemed concerned when Caleb

didn't succeed the first time, so I shared the story of a great inventor who succeeded in developing the light bulb. I asked the kids how many times he succeeded in inventing it? One, they answered. Then I asked them how many times he failed? Hundreds, they answered. I pointed out that failure is a path to learning and ultimately success. It took Caleb three tries, and we had quite the celebration when our fire crackled with warmth. He remembers the support from the campers as his "High" from the day.



Some Buffalos? Our impromptu dance party, to the A Capella version of "Stayin' Alive" after we played rock, paper, scissors, SURVIVOR! A fun game to help us learn about the three things people need to survive in an extreme outdoor setting. We all agreed on the Buffalo of seeing our older campers take care of and mentor our younger campers. As the seasons pass, we are beginning to form deeper relationships with our repeat campers. As they grow into MALT's culture of curiosity, care, and play we see more and more, young leaders emerging.



Some Lows? Winter is all about self-care. It's the best teacher for concepts like preparation, cause and effect, and thinking ahead. Of course cold fingers and toes are a challenge and as the week went on, our campers learned to keep moving, participate in games that get blood flowing, and speak up if they needed help with a hand warmer or wet glove. Self-care can easily be overlooked as a "Low", but we all agreed it provided valuable teachable moments.

