

Hunting and foraging classes gain popularity, as more people want to connect with nature

Celia Lopis-Johnson
Harvest Public Media

People have harvested wild foods for millennia, but learning how to do it today is harder, because fewer people have those skills. These groups are teaching people to eat “field to fork” again.

Leonore Enfield tried for the first time last fall to shoot a deer. She spent a full day sitting in an elevated stand near Lawrence, Kansas, with an experienced hunter as mentor.

“We did not get a single thing,” Enfield said, laughing. “It was totally worth it.”

The two of them watched the sun rise and set. They drank hot chocolate and ate snacks. They sat quietly with their crossbows for long periods, eyes and ears trained on their surroundings, whispering about movements in the distance. Enfield never got bored.

“The birds started chirping,” she recalled. “You got to see just the movement of life around you — undisturbed — and so it was amazing.”

Enfield says the experience of hunting can give a meal a deeper meaning.

“It’s, like, primal,” she said. “It’s like those basic things that everybody can relate to, but very few people nowadays understand.”

Humans have fished, foraged and hunted for millennia, but those activities have been sidelined in the modern U.S., where much of the population no longer eats any wild foods. Now the knowledge of how to track down your own sustenance is being sought-after by people who want to strengthen their connection to plants, animals and landscapes.

Ethnobotanist Linda Black Elk has seen a surge in people seeking foraging skills. She studies and teaches about relationships between plants and humans, and she works for the Minnesota-based, Native-led North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, or NATIFS.

“It is absolutely wild how many requests for plant walks and educational materials we get,” said Black Elk, the nonprofit’s director of education. “It is literally every day.”

People reach out in search of workshops and informa-

tion about harvesting specific plants. The group publishes illustrated cards and posts detailed videos on foraging and cooking for each region of the country. Its goal is to improve access to Indigenous foods — especially for Native people — and to support tribal food sovereignty.

Wild plants and proteins can lower a family’s grocery bill, provide medicines, promote fairness in food systems and offer a sense of place, Black Elk said.

“My grandmother used to say that you know you’re not home when you don’t know the plants outside your door,” Black Elk said. “So if you want to feel at home somewhere — learn those plants, build those relationships.”

Black Elk, who is not a tribal member, was raised with wild food traditions on both sides of her family. Her mother grew up in South Korea, where she foraged to put food on the table, and her father’s mother was a Southerner who loved pokeweed and wild onions.

“One of my very first memories is harvesting wild onions with my grandmother,” she said.

Enfield graduated this summer from a pilot program that teaches Kansans to harvest, process and eat wild foods legally, sustainably and safely. Much like a master gardener program, those who complete the Wild Foods Academy commit to volunteering in their communities to show others how to eat “field to fork.”

“It helps people to be connected to each other, to the land,” said Enfield, who works at the Kansas Association for Conservation and Environmental Education. “When you can do that, then you’re more filled, more well-rounded, more connected.”

When the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks started holding workshops on easily accessible wild sources of protein, the events drew plenty of interest. Just a few generations ago, wild rabbit and squirrel were common fare, but over the decades, they’ve vanished from many dinner tables.

One training session on how to trap, kill, process and cook squirrels attracted more than 60 people in Lawrence. Just

as many people came to a similar workshop at Hillsdale State Park on raccoons, where attendees gobbled up homemade “racquitos” — raccoon taquitos.

Amy Bousman, who works at the department, taught those workshops (and made those racquitos). She says small animals are some of the most accessible sources of wild protein. A squirrel trap is cheaper than hunting equipment. It also works well for people with mobility issues who may not be able to lug hunting gear through woods.

She’s also seen lots of interest in learning how to gig — or spear — frogs.

This raises the question of how to make it easy for more people to learn. The wildlife department is a relatively small agency and can’t meet all the requests for events on gathering mushrooms and wild greens, for example.

“There’s just not staff capacity,” Bousman said. “There’s no shortage of interest, but there is a shortage of qualified and available people to lead those kinds of classes.”

Separately, Bousman was working with Indigenous experts on a program to teach other members of the Native community their methods for deer hunting, butchering and cooking.

The experience drove home to Bousman the role of mentors in boosting access to traditional sources of nutrition for their communities. She began sketching out ideas for a Wild Foods Academy that would engage leaders from more backgrounds, offering extra training as needed and helping them earn certifications to teach angling, archery and hunter’s education, for example.

The state wildlife department approved a pilot run. This past year, 10 students from across Kansas met monthly to learn from each other and from experienced hunters, anglers and foragers.

They hunted waterfowl and bowfished silver carp. They discussed ethics and sustainability. They learned about chronic wasting disease in deer and watched a wildlife disease expert dissect the head of a roadkill button buck to learn what part of the brain gets test-

ed for the illness.

Patrice Gonzalez, the branch manager of an environmental learning library in Kansas City, Kansas, gigged her first bullfrog.

“I learned how to dispatch it and then prep it. I took it home and showed my mom, who was super proud,” she said. “We fried it with coconut oil and it tastes pretty good.”

Gonzalez said it surprises people to know that although raised in an urban area, she grew up playing outside barefoot, splashing around in the county lake, making up games with hedge apples and caring for a wide variety of pets, like ducks and turtles.

Now, as an adult, harvesting wild foods offers another way to interact with nature. She looks forward to mentoring others in her city, especially people of color.

“I’m excited to show people who look like me in my community that we can do things like this,” Gonzalez said. “I know there’s a need, and I also know there’s a want for it.”

She and other graduates will hold at least two workshops a year to teach outdoor skills in their communities.

The Wild Foods Academy is just one model for increasing access to wild foods.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources created a mobile kitchen and drove it to events around the state so people could taste wild fish and game. The nonprofit wild-HERness teaches women in Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma and other states outdoor skills such as field dressing, skinning and butchering deer.

At North Dakota State University, the Indigenous Food Sovereignty Emerging Leaders Program works to support food sovereignty. It also works to address health disparities in Native communities related to decades of discrimination and marginalization after the U.S. government forcibly removed tribes from their territories and traditional food sources.

The program includes, in part, teaching participants to harvest wild food and medicine. It also gives students a chance to explore Indigenous-led initiatives like NATIFS, the Minnesota-based

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El Niño strengthens, could bring wetter winter weather to Kansas, expert says

Morgan Chilson
Kansas Reflector

TOPEKA — Kansas weather lived up to its tempestuous reputation Wednesday as the dregs of Hurricane Polo launched more than a dozen tornadoes throughout the state.

“Kansas dished out tornadoes like Santa handing out candy canes,” wrote one storm chaser who posts online as Kansas Twisters. “No idea how many there were, but I was blessed to see 10-15 today.”

Accuweather reported that about 12 tornadoes touched down, but the severe weather created dozens of additional funnels. On Thursday, heavy rains resulted in flood watches.

Recent weather has been unusual, with an “incredible run” of above normal temperatures for 37 days, as of Tuesday, said Matthew Sittel, assistant state climatologist.

In a weekly climate report, Sittel said while high temperatures during the day were about normal, night temps weren’t falling into the lows expected for September.

“The lack of chilly starts to the day at this point in the year is quite unusual and is, in some cases, unprecedented,” Sittel said.

Goodland is an example, he said. The coldest temperature through Sept. 29 was 50 degrees, whereas the normal low is 45.

“In over 130 years of climate data, there has never been a September at Goodland in which it didn’t fall into the 40s at least once,” Sittel said in the climate update. “It’s a similar story at Wichita, where 60 degrees is the coldest September temperature. This too is unprecedented.”

Sittel said that in 140 years of recordkeeping, 55 degrees is the warmest monthly minimum for September in Wichita.

Winter weather projections may be affected by El Nino, a weather event that occurs when ocean temperatures rise, shifting wind patterns. Warnings of a “super El Niño” hit over the summer, with accompanying projections about what that means for the winter climate.

Sittel said in an email to Kansas Reflector that the June, July and August average sea surface temperature was the “most above normal” for that time frame since 1950.

“This is based on a new formulation called RONI, the

Relative Oceanic Niño Index,” he said. “It’s an index that considers the temperatures with respect to a normal sea surface temperature that has changed over the years. Saying that it’s the warmest ever, if true, suggests this is all due to El Niño.”

Sittel hesitates to use the term “super El Niño,” which he said was coined by the news media and has no official definition.

During an El Niño, the sea temperatures are warmer than average and, yes, it looks as if those temperatures are higher than in previous years. What does that mean for the upcoming months?

NPR reported that El Nino effects are ramping up the number of hurricanes in the Pacific and also responsible for the lack of hurricanes in the Atlantic. With no ocean in sight, what is Kansas likely to see?

“That’s not a bad thing for Kansas,” Sittel said. “El Niño years on average have produced slightly above normal precipitation totals across Kansas during the winter months. The key here is this is an average; it’s not a guarantee that it will happen, just a tendency when all historical events are averaged.”

It is difficult to determine what will happen because there isn’t good historical data about strong Niños, he said.

El What are El Niño and La Niña?

“During normal conditions in the Pacific ocean, trade winds blow west along the equator, taking warm water from South America towards Asia. To replace that warm water, cold water rises from the depths — a process called upwelling. El Niño and La Niña are two opposing climate patterns that break these normal conditions. Scientists call these phenomena the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) cycle. El Niño and La Niña can both have global impacts on weather, wildfires, ecosystems, and economies. Episodes of El Niño and La Niña typically last nine to 12 months, but can sometimes last for years. El Niño and La Niña events occur every two to seven years, on average, but they don’t occur on a regular schedule. Generally, El Niño occurs more frequently than La Niña.” — National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

See FIRE, continued from page 2

Be safe in the kitchen: Cooking is the leading cause of home fires in the U.S. Follow these five steps to help you avoid a cooking fire:

- Never leave cooking food unattended. If you must leave the kitchen for even a short period of time, turn off the stove. Use a timer to remind yourself that the stove or oven is on.
- Avoid wearing loose clothing or dangling sleeves while cooking.
- Keep kids away from cooking areas by enforcing a “kid-free zone” of three feet around the stove.
- Keep anything that can catch on fire, such as pot holders, oven mitts, wooden utensils, paper or plastic bags, food packaging, and towels or curtains, away from your stovetop and oven

or any other appliance in the kitchen that generates heat.

- Purchase a fire extinguisher to keep in your kitchen.

Heat your home safely: Home heating equipment is the second leading cause of home fires. As the time of year nears when people turn the heat back on, take these five steps to heat your home safely:

- Never use a cooking range or oven to heat your home. Never leave a fire burning in the fireplace unattended. Make sure any embers in the fireplace are extinguished before going to bed or leaving home.
- Space heaters: It’s critical to keep at least three feet of space around all

heating equipment, and never leave space heaters unattended.

- If you must use a space heater, place it on a level, hard and nonflammable surface, such as a ceramic tile floor. Don’t place it on rugs and carpets, or near bedding and drapes. And keep children and pets away from the heater.
- Plug space heater power cords directly into outlets — never an extension cord. Turn it off every time you leave the room or go to sleep.

“According to the National Fire Protection Association, there was a home fire every 23 seconds in 2024 which claimed a life every two hours and 14 minutes,” Wedge said. “During Fire Prevention Week, we here at the Red Cross urge everyone to develop their evacuation plans, check their smoke alarms and help keep the members of their household safe.”

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HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION No. 5004

A PROPOSITION to amend section 1 of article 5 of the constitution of the state of Kansas to require individuals to be citizens of the United States, at least 18 years of age and a resident of the voting area in which such person seeks to vote in order to vote in this state.

Be it resolved by the Legislature of the State of Kansas, two-thirds of the members elected (or appointed) and qualified to the House of Representatives and two-thirds of the members elected (or appointed) and qualified to the Senate concurring therein:

Section 1. The following proposition to amend the constitution of the state of Kansas shall be submitted to the qualified electors of the state for their approval or rejection: Section 1 of article 5 of the constitution of the state of Kansas is hereby amended to read as follows:

“§ 1. Qualifications of electors. Every(a) *No person shall be deemed a qualified elector unless such person:*

(1) *Is a citizen of the United States who;*

(2) *has attained the age of eighteen years; and who*

(3) *except as provided in subsection (b) or (c), resides in the voting area in which he or she such person seeks to vote shall be deemed a qualified elector:*

(b) *Laws of this state relating to voting for presidential electors and candidates for the office of president and vice-president of the United States shall comply with the laws of the United States relating thereto. A citizen of the United States, who is otherwise qualified to vote in Kansas for presidential electors and candidates for the offices of president and vice-president of the United States may vote for such officers either in person or by absentee ballot notwithstanding the fact that such person may have become a nonresident of this state if his or her such person's removal from this state occurs during a period in accordance with federal law next preceding such election.*

(c) *A person who is otherwise a qualified elector may vote in the voting area of his or her such person's former residence either in person or by absentee ballot notwithstanding the fact that such person may have become a nonresident of such voting area during a period prescribed by law next preceding the election at which he or she such person seeks to vote, if his such person's new residence is in another voting area in the state of Kansas.”*

Sec. 2. The following statement shall be printed on the ballot with the amendment as a whole:

“Explanatory statement. This amendment would clarify that only a person who is a citizen of the United States is eligible to vote in this state.

“A vote for this proposition would clarify that only a person who is a citizen of the United States is eligible to vote in this state.

“A vote against this proposition would make no change to the constitution of the state of Kansas, and the language concerning voter qualifications would remain the same.”

Sec. 3. This resolution, if approved by two-thirds of the members elected (or appointed) and qualified to the House of Representatives and two-thirds of the members elected (or appointed) and qualified to the Senate, shall be entered on the journals, together with the yeas and nays. The secretary of state shall cause this resolution to be published as provided by law and shall cause the proposed amendment to be submitted to the electors of the state at the general election in November in the year 2026, unless a special election is called at a sooner date by concurrent resolution of the legislature, in which case the proposed amendment shall be submitted to the electors of the state at the special election.