

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



December 19, 2018

In addition to presents and music, another welcome sign of Christmas is the dazzling light displays shining in our homes and around our towns. Just as many Christmas carols trace their origins to ancient pagan celebrations, many of our Christmas lights are also a blend of both pagan and Christian feasts and festivals that celebrate lighter days to come. Today let's spotlight the gift of light we welcome each year.

For millennial, candles and fires have brightened the season. Germanic tribes set fires and placed evergreen boughs in a circle to hasten spring, a tradition that lives on in advent wreaths. In Scandinavia, lighted candles were placed on a wheel and prayers offered to turn "the wheel of earth" back toward the sun to lengthen the day and restore warmth, a tradition celebrated today during Santa Lucia Festival. During northern European pre-Christian winter solstice festivals, fires were lit to symbolize the heat, light, and lifegiving gift of the sun, a tradition celebrated today with the burning of the Yule log, Yule clog, or Christmas block.

Whether small or large, simple or complex, electric light displays have mostly replaced candles and fires to signify the saving light of the Christmas Season as clearly as the Winter Solstice brings saving light to the Earth. Solstice literally means "the sun stands still," which this year will occur at 10:28 a.m. CST on Thursday, December 21, that moment in time when the sun's maximum elevation is at its lowest point of the year.

Thursday also marks the first day of winter, but instead I like to think of it as the first day of summer. I enjoy the way Jean Craighead George explains it as she writes a letter to her granddaughter in *Dear Rebecca, Winter Is Here*. "December 21. Dear Rebecca, I turned on the lights to eat breakfast this morning and put on my coat to go outside. Winter is here. It was brought by little hands of darkness. Each little hand is a few minutes long. In summer, they began bringing winter. They pulled the night over the edges of the dawn and dusk and made the days shorter. On June 21, while you were cooling off under the hose, winter began. The little hands cut off the warm sunlight. And the northern half of the Earth grew cold."

George then includes many examples of winter's hold on nature before ending on this hopeful note. "I light the fire in my fireplace. You sing jolly songs with your friends. And while you are singing, summer begins. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, little hands of light begin to push back the edges of darkness minute by minute. Before very long, I will eat my breakfast outdoors in the sunshine. The birds will return as the days grow longer. The frogs and turtles will come out of the warm mud, and the next thing you know, I'll be writing: Dear Rebecca, summer is here."

Season's Greetings from everyone at Conservation!

