



Laurier and northern high school students headed to a remote research site in Northwest Territories for a once-in-a-lifetime experience

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- [View the Hoarfrost River field course photo album.](#)

Accessible only by a small, 15-person plane from Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, the [Hoarfrost River research site](#) is as remote as it gets.

"I'll never be able to go somewhere like that again," says **Caleb Cober**, a fourth-year student in Wilfrid Laurier University's [Environmental Studies program](#).

Cober was one of eight Laurier students and three high school students from Yellowknife to attend a week-long field course in February at the home of **Kristen and Dave Olesen**.

The Olesen family has lived at Hoarfrost River for 30 years and has 33 working sled dogs, a commercial aviation service and hosts training courses on wilderness first aid and backcountry survival.

"You really felt secluded from the world," says Cober. "No one has really been there before; you just have no idea what to expect."

The field course, led by Geography and Environmental Studies faculty members [Bill Quinton](#) and [Michael English](#), along with technician **Alex McLean**, provided students with a unique opportunity to hear first hand about topics learned in the classroom like winter eco-hydrology, the impact of a recently devastating forest-fire on the land and to hear from Indigenous elder Herman Catholique and his son about their experiences of the changing landscape.

"The knowledge that the Olesens and Herman shared was more than you could ever get from a textbook," says **Katrina Greenfield**, a fourth-year student in the Environmental Studies program. "Herman was with us for a while and would share so many stories of his experiences. In the field, getting to actually collect data for yourself and using the snow water equipment was also cool."

A self-proclaimed outdoor-lover, Greenfield was inspired to join the field course to experience outdoor camping, the northern lights and the unknown.

With no running water, the students helped bring in water from the frozen lake, fished for fresh lake trout for dinner and chopped wood for the fires. Students stayed in large, winter tents with a cast iron stove to keep warm. Some nights went down to minus 50 degrees Celsius; the only bathroom was an outhouse.

"This is definitely a course for people that love being outside," says Greenfield. "How they live is so simple and they have such a strong connection with nature."

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Ella Kokelj, a grade 10 student from **Ecole Sir John Franklin High School** in Yellowknife, was thrilled to be able to learn about the land from the Laurier faculty members and the Olesens.

"I love being outside to learn about the land and the location of the course is very beautiful, it would be crazy to pass up an opportunity to go there," says Kokelj.

Both Cober and Greenfield were impressed with how the high school students handled the cold weather and were interested to hear about their experiences with plants and animals native to the area.

"I've grown up in Yellowknife, so I am pretty familiar with the winter season and how to handle the cold," says Kokelj. "The other Yellowknife students and I were able to help the Laurier students deal with the cold temperatures to which they were not as accustomed."

The group passed the time by going for outdoor walks, breaking out into research groups to take samples and collect data, and got a chance to use the equipment and an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) to map the landscape and terrain surround the Olesen homestead.

"The video taken by the UAV was really neat," says Kokelj. "I enjoyed the hands-on environment; we would learn about a concept indoors and then go straight out to apply what we had just learned."

Each student also got an opportunity to ride on the Olesen's dogsled through the forest or on the frozen lake.

"I didn't expect dogsledding to require so much balance and control," says Cober.

"Even though we only spent a week at Hoarfrost River, by the end it felt like we had lived there forever," says Kokelj. "Saying goodbye to the place and the people to whom I had grown very close was definitely the most challenging part of the week."

This is the third Northern field course led by Quinton, who has also led field courses at the [Scotty Creek field site](#) in NWT. [Find more information on Laurier's northern research program.](#)



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