



## Exploring the Gila River by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz

On November 19, the Arizona Trail Association (ATA) led a group of students from Superior Junior & Senior High School on a hike along the Arizona Trail (Passage 16) and through the Gila River itself. The group consisted of 13 students, two school representatives, and three leaders from the ATA.

The adventure began with a beautiful drive that took us south of Superior, past the Ray Mine, and down a long dirt road to the historic townsite of Cochran. Our easy crossing of the Gila River led us through a tamarisk thicket and on to the Arizona Trail. We stopped at a carsonite signpost and took a moment to revisit what the students knew about the trail and areas managed the Bureau of Land Management. The students could feel the weight of Matthew Nelson's words as he reminded them that as public land, the trail was theirs, and that sense of responsibility would become a major theme of the day.

We walked east along the Arizona Trail, past colorful rocks and towering saguaros. We were all feeling buoyant with the freedom of the trail and the glorious weather. The endemic Kelvin cholla cactus peppered along the trail lent a particularly special local flavor. As we came to a little mesa we decided to look around for evidence of those who had lived here 800-1,000 years ago. Sure enough, as we all put on our archaeologist hats and began our search we found potsherds, stone scrapers, and even a mano (grinding stone). It was a perfect time to talk about the area's history, and to facilitate a discussion about the importance of leaving artifacts where we found them. Lindsay, a high schooler offered up the idea that the things we were finding were "meant to be there," which extended the discussion beyond trail ethics and archaeological clues into the realm of respecting those people that had once lived in the place we were now visiting, as well as their descendants.



We decided to make our way down to the river for a nice lunch break, and discuss the principles of stewardship. We were not the only ones who found the river to be a great hang out! After lunch each student took out their field journal and documented the different animal tracks they were seeing along the muddy banks. Each student then got to use a track identification guidebook to fill in the picture of who had been coming to drink in the very same spot we had lunch. We successfully identified deer, bighorn sheep, javelina, coatimundi, raccoon, rodent, heron and coyote tracks.

It was hard for most of the youth to be so near the water without getting in, so with a quick vote it was decided we would return by wading back through the river. This made for a muddy and riotous adventure as everyone enjoyed watching each other slipping and sliding in the mud. Three of the junior high school girls practiced cooperation as they all held hands to get themselves through the deepest parts of the mud. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls shared what growing up in a small town like Superior was like, and when we took a break to adjust a slippery sneaker one of them gestured around and said, “*This* is what we have to do that’s nice around here.”



Most everyone had some gravel to dump out of their shoes by the end, but with the abundant track sightings and the feeling of the sun warming us from above as the icy water chilled our feet, we were all very pleased with how our adventure had turned out. We gathered back at the vehicles to talk about our highlights of the day and to distribute Leave No Trace ethics cards and Junior Explorer Handbooks. The youth were encouraged to think about how much life was supported by the Gila River and the preciousness of water as a resource in Arizona.

Then, with soggy shoes and happy hearts, we loaded up and headed back into town.



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