

## Enjoying the Arizona Trail Above and Below the Surface

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



Eight freshmen from Santa Rita High School's Ecology Club enjoyed an exploration of Colossal Cave Mountain Park on January 16, 2015. It was a beautiful sunny day with a chilly syncopated wind. In the quieter moments of our early morning hike we listened to a cacophony of birdsongs and identified the trilling call of the cactus wren. In the parking lot the students were asked how they thought they could improve their chances of seeing wild animals, and they had responded that being quiet would help to not scare them away, so they tread as lightly as they could and were impressively quiet and alert.

The trail was rife with teachable moments. First, we found two young saguaros using a nearby palo verde tree as nurse plant, the perfect opportunity to talk about ecological facilitation and collaboration in nature. The trail also had plenty of scat specimens, which the student's instructor Josh Ruddick enthusiastically began dissecting with his trail pliers. Each of the students got a chance to look at a scat and tracks identification guide to determine the producer of the scat. There were a few good giggles about how much interest there could be in poop!



Students and their teacher enjoy learning opportunities on the Arizona Trail.



Big cat scat on the AZT.

We made our way along switchbacks and over ridges down to one of the area's many washes for a good lunch spot. Down in the wash we talked about desert adaptations and CAM photosynthesis used by the surrounding cacti. We headed back after lunch to tour Colossal Cave.

Ethan, taking to the front of the group said with great sincerity to his teacher "I'd come to school a lot more often if we did hikes like this!" The general sense of awe and enjoyment at the desert's offerings doubled as soon as we got into the cave. "Awesome!" "Check this out!" "This is the coolest!" nearly drowned out our tour guide's introductions as all the students were immersed in the underground experience.

The tour covered the cave's formation, geology and hydrology of the surrounding area, some of the indigenous history of the cave, as well as a more contemporary look at the role that the Civilian Conservation Corps played in the creation of viable infrastructure for tourism that has stood the test of time.

Every participant left Colossal Cave Mountain Park with a sense of having learned and accomplished a great deal. Although this was the first Seeds of Stewardship outing with Santa Rita High School it certainly won't be the last.



Flowstone inside Colossal Cave.



Freshmen students pose for a photo after their underground adventure inside Colossal Cave.

**This Seeds of Stewardship outing made possible by a grant of funds from:**



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