

In Search of Wildflowers Within Saguaro National Park

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On February 25, three committed City High School students showed up for a Seeds of Stewardship outing. We intended to pull buffelgrass in Saguaro National Park to coincide with National Invasive Species Week, however because of the small turnout it was decided by the National Park Service that it would be best to reschedule. Since we were already headed to Saguaro National Park-West, we decided to stick to that area and enjoy some of the emerging wildflowers on the King Canyon Trail. The small group gave the trip a more intimate feel than the usual outings, and it gave the student's administrator an opportunity to share tales of his former life as an outdoor guide.



Taking a break on the King Canyon Trail within Saguaro National Park.



Charles talks up the ocotillos.

The mountains were vibrant with a color palette only available in spring. There were the oranges, yellows, purples, and pinks of poppies, lupines, globe mallow, and many more all close to the ground. At eye level and above was an infinite variety of greens. It had rained just the day before the outing and the ocotillo were unfurling beautiful new leaves. Jojoba bushes sprouted new growth brighter than their normal waxy leaves, perfect for safeguarding moisture, which we took time to notice and touch. There were many opportunities for the students think about plant life

cycles adaptations, with a special emphasis on pollinator attractors.

Charles reminded the three students to train their peripherals and not just their central vision while on the trail to better absorb all of their surroundings and the abundance of new growth and life all around. This was also an exercise in trusting in their body/eye coordination to navigate the sometimes uneven trail ahead. We made our way up a steep slope to the Sweetwater Trail where we enjoyed a great view of the Santa Catalina Mountains standing tall over Tucson. The students didn't know about the theory that the Tucson Mountains were originally part of what we now know as the Catalinas, and that through a process of crustal stretching, slid twenty miles to the west. It was difficult to imagine the geological and volcanic processes that would have moved the earth with so much force as to create the mountain chain we were standing on at that moment.



Gold poppies in bloom

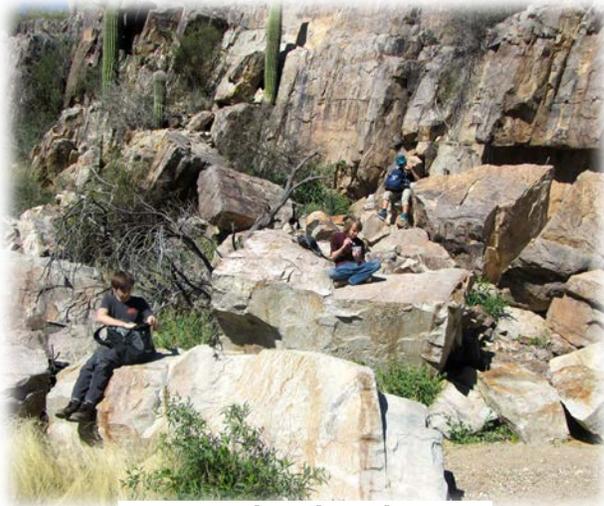
On our descent we met many other hikers out enjoying the beautiful day, which gave us the opportunity to practice good trail etiquette. Charles encouraged the students to take the lead on the way down, finding the

trail, and waiting for the rest of our party to catch up at regular intervals. He emphasized the leadership and responsibility one assumes at the front of a group, whether you have the official leadership role or not.

We stopped to eat lunch in an *arroyo* with petroglyphs decorating the surrounding rock faces. We tried to identify the differences between the older ones and the more recent mimicries. There was a nice diversity of plants in the wash, so what is normally a “find your tree” activity became the “find your plant” activity. Charles and the students took turns being led while blindfolded to different flowering bushes and grasses that they then had to identify again based on their tactile observations once the blindfold was removed.



Elijah leads Josh to discover plants by using senses other than sight.



Lunch on the rocks

This exercise surprised everyone, both with what they could discern only with their sense of touch and also how much was lost with the use of their eyes. Elijah, 16, said that he was much more dependent on his sense of smell blindfolded and relied on this as much as on his sense of touch to identify his plant. Charles shared with his students that being blindfolded created a paradoxical sensation of at once being in danger of tripping or hitting imagined objects everywhere, but equally sensing spaciousness and openness even when being led on a very tight path.

We finished the hike after lunch, looping our way back to the trailhead through the wash that still held tiny pools of water – miniature ecosystems created by the rain that fell just one day before our outing. Although our original plan to pull buffelgrass wasn’t fulfilled, everyone agreed that it was an outing with many great rewards.

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