

Sensory Activities Near Patagonia Lake

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



Patagonia area youth explore the lake not far from where they live.

On October 31, nine students from the Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center headed to Patagonia Lake for a hike. This group of adventurers dedicated their Halloween morning to exploring the great outdoors. We were joined by Caleb Weaver, who joined us from Borderlands Restoration – a local nonprofit organization.

We began at the Youth Center with the Leave No Trace pledge. Students who had formerly been hiking with Seeds of Stewardship shared the LNT principles with their friends. Each student was asked to agree to follow the leave

no trace ethics for the duration of the hike. They all consented and we were off to the lake.

Our trail began above the lake in desert and we followed it down toward the water, passing cane beard grass growing in clusters. This grass has a unique and enthralling characteristic: when you rub the fluffy nodes between your fingers they smell a lot like blueberries. This was the first of our olfactory adventures. We walked past some cows grazing and came to a nice grove of trees and brush. This was the perfect spot for our first activity: Find Your Plant.

“I love this one!” said Lalo who had been with Seeds of Stewardship on a summer hike. It’s an exercise that can never get old; students took turns leading each other blindfolded to specific plants and touching, smelling and gathering as much sensory information as they could without the use of their eyes. Once sighted they retraced their steps to find their plant. You could hear squeals of surprise and delight at the different textures and terrains they were traversing. We gathered up in a group to share observations and surprises from the experience.



Amaris giggles as Santini gathers clues

Reina commented that it was a trust exercise. Chloe said that her plant had smelled really good, which surprised her. They all agreed that they had been amazed at the different things they had picked up on as clues, like stickiness, fuzzyness, smell, and the sound of us talking to help their spatial awareness.

The trail led us down to the creek where students took off their shoes and began wading. We formed two parties that investigated upstream and downstream, discovering little microcosms of aquatic life in pools and islets.



Arianna and Bri investigate the creek

The general sentiment among the explorers was that they never wanted to leave. But alas, all too soon it was time to call them together for our closing activity. Halloween day offered a perfect opportunity to talk about fear in the animal world. We began with the most basic expressions of fear from the reptilian brain: fight, flight or freeze. Students determined from their experience that cows and sheep and deer were good examples of freeze, where dogs and other predators typically displayed fight instincts, and that rabbits and birds were an example of flight. The next step was linking these

reactions to our own behavior as humans, and understanding how much we had in common with the animals we had been describing, because we too are animals!

Students had been asked while they were wading to think about their scariest encounter with an animal. It was time for them to share. They partnered up with the instruction for one partner to share their scariest encounter story, and for the other partner to listen and retell the story from the perspective of the animal. It was a challenging assignment asking for creative perspective and active listening on both ends. The students rose to the challenge, sharing their own experiences of close encounters with dogs, bears, and unknown tent investigators. They responded with critter motivations, ranging from hunger and curiosity to protection of territory. The lesson in the end was not that animals wouldn't ever attack a human with good intentions, but that they are not malicious but rather carrying out instinctual reactions of fight, flight or freeze.



Lalo and Caleb share scary animal stories

We headed out, catching glimpses of butterflies and running into cows which we observed amble away from us through the new lens of fight, flight, or freeze. When we returned to the Youth Center, students unloaded from the van cheerful from our outing and ready to put on their costumes and enjoy trick-or-treating in Patagonia.

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