

Native Plant Scavenger Hunt near Patagonia

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On December 5, eight students from Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center embarked on a native plant inspired scavenger hunt on the Arizona Trail. We started the day with introductions and naming a favorite desert plant. Most of the students couldn't get past "cactus" without a lot of prompting and memory jogging.



The adventure begins at the AZT Map at the Harshaw Road Trailhead.

It was the perfect start to the day because the goal was to complete a scavenger hunt, identifying at least two native species of plants that grow in their school pollinator garden and on the Arizona Trail. The first stop was the garden, for a botany lesson with Borderlands Restoration botanist Caleb Weaver. The students filled out worksheets selecting two species of plants. Most selected rabbitbrush and sideoats grama, a grass growing abundantly in the pollinator garden. We also learned the names of the cottonwood tree, sycamore, juniper, and goose berry, in case we ran into them on our hike.

After students had made some observations about color, fruit/seeds, leaf structure, and whether it was a grass, shrub, forb, or other, we thanked Caleb and headed out to Harshaw Road Trailhead.

Two new students joined the hike today, and so it was an opportunity to stop and talk about the AZT. One of the new comers, Johnny, was already fairly knowledgeable about the trail and the outdoors, particularly as it pertained to hunting. He successfully identified different scat samples for his fellow students, and shared his knowledge about erosion.



Alex shows off sideoats grama

We hadn't been hiking long when we came across the first scavenger hunt item. Alex successfully spotted sideoats grama growing along the trail. We hiked a little further through more sideoats grama, also spotting many junipers and Amaris remarked, "You find it once, and then you see it everywhere!" The students were excited to check these items off their list. We also ran into cane beardgrass, which some of them remembered from the previous hike as the grass that smells like blueberries.



Marilyn sketches rabbitbrush

Over the summer some of the older students from the youth group had hiked along this same trail for an art outing. When we passed the spot where we had stopped to draw Marilyn recognized it. "I still have those drawings from the outing up in my room!" she told me.

We moved from a shady mesquite grove up into more ocotillo and grassland. Johnny spotted some *Mammillaria macdougalii*, a flat cactus that grows more in girth than height. Several rainbow hedgehog cacti also were popping out of the grass, and we stopped to take pictures of their colorful spines.



Rainbow hedgehog cactus

All too soon it was time for the expedition to turn around and head downhill. Alex, another newcomer, said to no one in particular as we passed back through the mesquites, "I had fun today! I think kids need to just put away their technology and go for a hike more often." Steve Coleman, co-founder of the PYEC, and I couldn't have said it better ourselves!

We said goodbye back at the youth center with a round of high fives and best wishes for the holidays. Everyone said that they were looking forward to more adventures in 2016.



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