

The Mystery & Magic of the Coyote Mountain Wilderness

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On December 9, 2015 12 students from City High School adventured southwest of Tucson to the Coyote Mountains Wilderness. Guiding the day was their administrator and former hiking guide Charles Schnarr as well as the Arizona Trail Association's Executive Director, Matt Nelson. Since many of the students had ever been to this small BLM wilderness area before, their curiosity and anticipation continued to grow as we drove further and further back along remote ranch roads.



Irene and Seamus check out petroglyphs

After driving to the end of the road, we circled up and everyone shared their name and one thing they found to be beautiful. Payton shared, "I think math is beautiful." Skylar thought makeup and flowers were beautiful. Matt Nelson told the students, "I think silence is beautiful." After this icebreaker we made our way along with the usual chatter of high schoolers. The unique features of this wilderness area were immediately apparent to a discerning eye, but for those less attuned they hid just under the surface. We had not walked more than 10 feet when we passed a large boulder with multiple petroglyphs, along with potsherds that were scattered everywhere along the path. Some of the students wouldn't discover these artifacts if we had not been encouraged to pay close attention to them.

After hiking along a winding dusty road, we took our first break. The granite domes and rock faces distinctive to this wilderness area became closer and clearer, as we found a panel of petroglyphs to stop and admire. The students were then asked about what they thought the native people were trying to communicate. The fact that we only have educated guesses about the meaning behind these symbols seemed exciting to these young adventurers, and their interpretations were welcomed as part of the conversation about the people who once lived in the area.



Whose hand made this mano?

Turning our attention from archaeology to ecology, Oona, a sophomore, pointed out invasive Bermuda grass growing all around the base of the rocks. Some students found coral beans, nearly glowing with poisonous redness. Matt told them a story about moving to Arizona and gifting a friend a bracelet he made from the beautiful beans, not realizing that they would cause her to break out in a rash.

Moving onward we hiked up the trail and crossed over an old dam with very little water. The students had only experienced hiking on a well-maintained trail up until now, so this was a new challenge which they met with surprising determination and enthusiasm. Single file, the group pushed through a drainage thickly populated with cane grass, a native species of grass that resembled bamboo. On the other side of this dense thicket, finding the trail between grasses and prickly pears, a startled quail burst forth from underneath Zavier's feet and gave everyone a show of its best and noisiest defense.



Crossing the dam, don't look down!

The students climbed and scrambled up until we found a rocky spot with a view extending over the desert landscape, and we all took our places for a quiet and contemplative lunch. After eating and a chance to explore, we reassembled as a group to discuss what had surprised us or intrigued us so far. Many of the students felt the unique and special quality of this particular area, because it is so seldom visited.

We hiked out, and began our archaeological exploration in earnest, with Matt pointing out manos and potsherds every few feet. For the final reflection activity we stopped at the boulders near the vehicle and explored the petroglyphs. The students did some journaling and then we had a conversation about the significance of this wilderness area. We asked them why they thought it was worth protecting, and how could it best be done? Vincent said, "I think it should be protected but I also kinda' wish I could bring my friends here and show them stuff." Seamus said, "It should be protected and I'm glad it's so far away from people so they don't mess it up."

These young stewards are already hitting on the crux of some of the paradoxes that lie in conservation. Luckily they have learned the importance of leave no trace ethics and can share it with ~~those~~ their friends and family with whom they share time outdoors.



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



NINA MASON PULLIAM
CHARITABLE TRUST