

Flowing Grasslands on the Arizona Trail

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On February 12, 2016 six students from the Santa Rita High School Conservation Club headed out on their first hike of the season on the Arizona Trail near Patagonia. Four of the participants were Seeds of Stewardship participants last year, and back for more! Along with their teacher, Josh Ruddick, this group elected to visit Patagonia as their first outing of the year because they were interested in exploring and learning about Arizona's grasslands.

We began our hike with a recap of leave no trace principles. Here, the experienced students had the opportunity to teach their peers about the importance of packing out trash, even their biodegradable garbage. They were also reminded about outdoor bathroom use and why a handy shovel should travel in our backpack at all times.



Mr. Ruddick shows students yucca fibers

This trail began from the parking lot crossing Harshaw Road, where it immediately made its way through tall grasses. Stopping to identify native side oat grama and the famous blueberry fragrance cane beard grass, students were able to recognize that this passage of the AZT is incredible because it offers a beautiful view of Red Mountain and the Patagonia Mountains nearby.

Moving forward, we stopped to admire and learn about the botanical, historical, and geological resources of the area. For example, Mr. Ruddick shared how indigenous people used the fibers of the yucca plant by pounding them flat to make paintbrushes. Students also found geodes containing tiny quartz crystals, which they got to examine under Mr. Ruddick's magnifying glass. He also noted how a grove of mesquite trees that lines a portion of the trail is actually an invader to the grasslands.



Collecting water samples from the creek

In addition to our day on the AZT, we decided that we would venture to the Nature Conservancy Preserve, famous for its wildlife. When we arrived, the volunteer at the office was excited to tell the students about the pack of 30 coatimundi that had just made their way through the creek! He directed us to hike downwind to see if we could sneak up on them. Unfortunately, we didn't get to see them, but we did enjoy the sighting of woodpeckers and other birds.

As part of the conservation club, Santa Rita High School maintains an aquaponic tank filled with trout in their classroom. Since they have been experimenting with water quality testing all semester, they brought along a testing kit to use on the creek. As part of their final activit, they took water samples and tested the pH, ammonia and nitrate levels of the water and recorded the levels in their field journals. This led to a great discussion about what kind of environments might be good for native fish species versus the fish in their classroom tank.



Chris and Brendan check their results

What makes this club complete is their interest in food production and gardening, so our last stop of the day was in Patagonia to enjoy ice cream from the local café, and to admire the pollinator garden that was built by Patagonia youth in collaboration with Borderlands Restoration.

After a full day, the Santa Rita High School students returned just in time for the school day to be over. After an exciting day of adventuring on the Arizona Trail and the Nature Conservancy Preserve, they headed home content with some special knowledge of their desert home.



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