

## Finding the Jaguar Within

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



El Jefe as captured on Cat Cam

On February 18, 2016, 16 students from EDGE Charter High School ventured out with curiosity and excitement on a special hike to Madera Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains. Their teacher Emily Gindlesparger had requested this outing because El Jefe, the only known jaguar prowling in the United States, was recently caught on a wildlife camera in the area. Since many of the students had never been to Madera Canyon and were unfamiliar with El Jefe, we saw this as an excellent opportunity to introduce concepts of critical wildlife habitat, especially to those students who were incredulous that a jaguar could even be found here in Arizona.



For students already involved with Seeds of Stewardship, this was their fourth outing of the year. For the additional eight new students, this was their first. It is exciting to witness the growing number of students interested at Edge High School. Completing their high school education in a self-paced, half-day classroom experience, and their exposure and awareness of what being a responsible outdoor steward is often limited. So with this group, Leave No Trace ethics started out as a perfect discussion to our hike. We could see that many had already started littering the parking lot with granola bar wrappers and orange peels. Coming to realize their personal responsibility of maintaining the cleanliness of our natural environment was simple, and without a quip, they graciously picked up every bit of trash, even the tiny pieces beyond the parking lot.

Our destination today was Josephine Saddle because there had been word of jaguar prints near that area. At the trailhead we started out with a quick five senses check. What could they smell, see, hear, feel, and taste? Some noticed the smell of leaves or dirt; all could name one thing they were seeing. But as everyone paused to hear faint birdsong in the distance, we quickly discovered that we were by far the noisiest animals around.

The trail up to Josephine Saddle is steep, so two groups quickly formed. Climbing higher, the views were quickly expanding before our eyes and the sense of freedom exhilarated the



Open trail under blue skies

students. It was as if the stress from the classroom and their lives had been released into the openness of the trail. For those students that were slower in pace, this hike was about pushing themselves beyond their limits. About twenty minutes into our climb, one new student wasn't sure she "was cut out for nature." But with encouragement and help from her friends and fellow hikers, she made it to the top with laughter and a feeling of accomplishment.



**Making their way up the trail in Madera Canyon**

Sharing in a challenging outdoor experience has the ability to create common ground, especially for students who come from very diverse backgrounds. Pausing under a canopy of trees to take in the fragrance of pines, and enjoying lunch by the stream where the sounds of birds chirping were heard all around gave everyone a true sense of camaraderie.

We may not have found signs of El Jefe, but they all shared in the discovery of their own inner strength.

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

