



Wildlife and Petroglyphs Along the Arizona Trail

by Sabrina Carlson

On February 29, 2016, 30 students from Ms. Esparza's sixth grade class at Sinagua Middle School kicked off our spring season with an amazing outing to Picture Canyon!

Before loading the bus, students got a quick review of Leave No Trace principles. We also engaged in a lesson about habitat and habitat fragmentation. Initially the students confused "habitat" with "house," but quickly learned that a habitat also includes the sources of food and water as well as the footpaths to survive. They learned about the importance of Picture Canyon's riparian habitats and the important work of biologists to reconnect habitats to wildlife. They were also excited to discover that big cats have been known to use the Arizona Trail to link together segments of historical habitat range.



Viewing The Falls

Along the banks of the Rio de Flag, students quickly began spotting signs of animal life. Acorn woodpecker granaries and hairy woodpecker insect holes were spotted in fallen snags. Gopher tunnels crossed the side of the trail, and three families of mallard ducks could be seen swimming in the reeds.

Farther downstream, we observed a waterfall and noticed the way a rapid change in gradient affects the velocity of a stream. Many of the students who have never been to Picture Canyon were shocked to learn we had a waterfall within the Flagstaff city limits! In fact it was there, on the opposite side of the stream, that we spotted the first two petroglyphs.

As we descended the trail we saw a variety of birds. From chickadees and nuthatches flitting from branch to branch, to the call of the hairy woodpecker. With great surprise, we also came across a circling golden eagle just a hundred feet away! We stood and watched, hoping we would see her ambush new prey, but she seemed more intent on scouting rather than diving.

At the bridge over the rio along the Arizona Trail Passage 32 (Elden Mountain), we paused to notice the distinctly different microclimates on the two sides of the canyon. Here they learned about angles of the sun, and how south facing walls will get more hours of direct sunlight per day making them warmer than the north facing walls. Even though everything was completely dry on the opposite side of the canyon, this was why there was still so much snow on our hike in.

During our lunch break, several of the faster eaters began an impromptu game of "pooh sticks" on the bridge. Fans of A.A. Milne will recognize this as the game Winnie the Pooh played with his

friends by dropping two sticks over the side of a bridge, and then racing to the other side to see whose stick popped out first. I was happily surprised that this old fashioned game was still known and played by youth in our digital age.

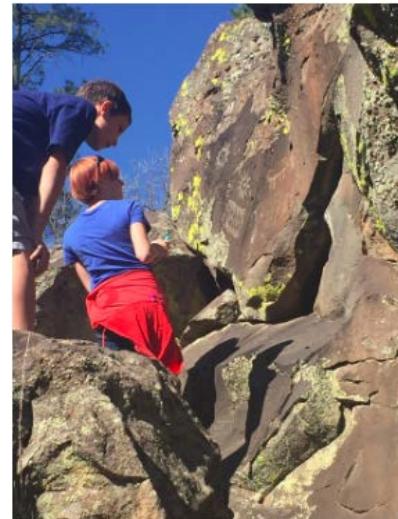
After lunch, we walked up to view some of the larger petroglyph panels, for which Picture Canyon is named. The young scholars were in awe of the number and variety of pictures they saw. We reviewed the difference between an observation and an inference. Each student was then invited to be an archaeologist for the day by choosing three petroglyphs to study in depth. In their Arizona Trail journals, they drew the shape of the rock drawing, made observations about each one, and then drew some inferences about what they thought the picture depicted and why they thought ancient people might have chosen to create this image.

On our way back out to the bus, as we ascended the north side of the canyon we found one of the most exciting discoveries of all. As we had been searching for signs of animal life, our senses were primed to notice the sawdust-like scat of a porcupine. I advised the students that there could easily be a porcupine sleeping in a nearby ponderosa pine, so keep a look out. Sure enough, moments later a student exclaimed, "I think I see one!" In fact, high in a pine tree was the distinctive dark mass of a porcupine. If you looked at it from just the right angle, you could even see its quills reflecting the sunlight!

It was a beautiful day for a three-mile hike with a terrific group of young explorers to kick off an adventurous spring season.



Youth Scientists!



Studying the Petroglyphs

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