

Marking the End of a Memorable Season

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On May 13, 2016, four students from Santa Rita High School gathered for a full day of trail work on the Arizona Trail at the Molino Basin Trailhead, with co-leaders Neil Stitzer from Southwest Trail Solutions, and Treven Hooker, the new Southern Arizona Youth Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Arizona Trail Association.



Santa Rita High School Conservation Club on the Arizona Trail

On this hot spring day, Neil started the students off discussing the importance of tool and trail safety including hydration, reptile awareness, as well as proper tool techniques. He reminded students that upper body strength is much more effective when combined with leg strength! Those that participated in the Seeds of Stewardship last year were able to identify the McLeods, pick-mattocks, loppers and handsaws, so they quickly got to work!

Hiking east on the AZT, it was clearly visible that the winter rains had given them plenty to do. Neil began by demonstrating techniques for building good drainage on an eroded portion of the trail. After his first demonstration, students could then easily identify trail needs, so the students took turns sharing the load of digging and clearing out blocked up drainages and brushing the corridor for easy trail access.

Always adept at linking the trail to the classroom, Santa Rita High School teacher Josh Ruddick, had taught students in advance about the different kinds of lichen to look out for, and how they are indicators of air quality. As they hiked along, they were able to identify crustose and foliose lichen. Brendan would later say, "This lichen lesson was the highlight of the trip!" They also learned to identify manzanita, a popular desert shrub often seen in javelina scat, which is easy to identify because of the prolific amount of manzanita berries they love to eat. Treven also mentioned that in rangeland fire fighting, manzanita is a threatening plant because of its flammability.



Students work hard while learning new skills

In the shade of a juniper tree, we stopped to take a break to admire the turkey vultures overhead, and the conversation shifted to our favorite desert animals. Excited students named Gila monsters, Cooper's hawks, jackrabbits, and the solitary jaguar *El Jefe* as some of their top picks.



Sarah, Damien, and Brendan enjoy lunch in the shade

After a few more hours of hard work on the trail, we finished the day with a lunch break in a shady, dry creek bed. A whole year has passed, so students reflected on highlights of their Seeds of Stewardship outings as well as what they learned from doing trail work. They all agreed that despite the physical exertion of trail work they felt as though they had made a meaningful contribution to this segment of trail.

Sarah said that her highlight of the year had been on their first hike in Patagonia with Mr. Ruddick, where they found a surprising and hidden source of water where ferns had been

growing. Jessica said her favorite part had been hiking with her boyfriend and enjoying the time they spent together on the trail. To top it all off, Damien had baked cookies for his fellow stewards to celebrate the end of the season, so we gratefully enjoyed a few of his tasty sweets before saying goodbye and heading back into town.



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