



Hiking, Flowers, and End of Year Fun! Part 1

by Sabrina Carlson

On May 16, 2016, 24 students from Mr. Caslin's 5th grade class from Kinsey School hiked south on the the Arizona Trail from Forest Road 418. We had no particular destination in mind, but hoped to hike about two miles to find a nice lunch spot before turning around. Our goals for the day were to look for the first emergence of wildflowers and to celebrate the end of a wonderful and productive school year.

When we first unloaded the bus, we took a moment to notice the tall aspen trees that surrounded us. This group had visited Aspen Corner in the fall to view the golden leaves. Seeing the emergence of the light green buds of spring today brought the experience full circle.



Off on our hike!

We hiked a short way up the trail and paused to notice the ground cover under the aspens. Even though very few flowers had opened, there was already a diverse bounty of plants dotting the forest floor. We discussed the importance of an ecosystem having diversity in plant species, especially plants that flower at slightly different intervals. If all the plants flowered at exactly the same time, pollinators like bees and hummingbirds would only have food for a very period. I was impressed by how much this class knew about the declining bee populations and some of the steps we can take to ensure a healthier population of bees in our world. One of the students even shared that she was planting a bee garden at her house this summer to try to help give the bees a safe haven.



"Mule deer" hiding at their home base.

We continued our uphill hike out of the aspens and into a patch of ponderosa pines. Once again, we discussed the ground cover, tree density and forest health. In this area, the trees were extremely dense, small and uniform in size. The ground was completely obscured by pine needles with no space for grasses or other herbaceous plants to survive. It was agreed that this was a very unhealthy section of forest that would be very prone to complete destruction if a forest fire came through. We discussed historical density, the past 150 years of fire suppression policy, and the efforts being made by the Forest Service to remedy the overgrowth of trees that present danger to both the ecosystem and surrounding communities. We did find one big, beautiful tree right at the corner of a switchback. It was a huge, old growth ponderosa pine, bearing scars of lightning strikes and fires long ago. We noted the large number of downturned dead branches on

the lower half of the tree. The students learned that since these branches no longer receive sunlight, the tree cuts off resources to those appendages to save water and nutrients for the parts of the tree more able to photosynthesize.

A little farther along the trail, we found the perfect spot in a small open field for lunch and some games. After a leisurely lunch, we revisited some activities they had learned at the beginning of the year. We played the color matching game, where I hand out a variety of colored cards and set everyone to the task of finding something in nature that matches the paint color as closely as possible. It is always exciting when the student who drew the hot pink or bright orange color card finds a match. Some students are confident that no natural item could be found in the outdoors with that color.

After finding a rainbow of colors in the natural world around us we played a game called “predator and prey.” This is a class favorite in which a local predator, like a mountain lion is trying to catch its prey, which today is a mule deer. The prey uses their best defense to move from one “home” to another without being eaten. But they must keep moving! If a prey animal never leaves its home, it won’t find any food!

Before we knew it, the time had come to hike back to the bus. It was a wonderfully relaxing way to end the year, and reinforce all of the learning we had done during the school year.



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