



Hiking, Flowers, and End of Year Fun! Part 2

by Sabrina Carlson

On May 18, 2016, 26 students from Mr. Doerfler's 5th grade class from Kinsey School hiked south on the Arizona Trail from Forest Road 418. We planned to follow the same general schedule as their partner class had two days earlier.

Before we began hiking, we took a moment to notice the leafing aspen trees. I asked the students to recall the experience they had the previous fall viewing the leaves at Aspen Corner. While some commented on the different stage of the tree's life cycle, many also remembered how they had ended up with cold wet feet.

We crossed the road to the north side of the trail to inspect a water cache some students had found while walking into the bushes for a bathroom visit. Most of the students had never seen a cache before, and this provided an opportunity for education on the etiquette around caching.



Hiking through the aspens.

We hiked up through the beautiful aspens, pausing again to notice the diversity of plant life on the forest floor. Since the only flowers blooming today were dandelions, we took some time to notice the different leaf shapes. We discussed the importance of leaf shape and attachment points to study the taxonomy and correct identification of plants. Once they began to allow their eyes to see the different shapes, colors and textures of the leaves, they were able to fully appreciate the diversity of this little patch of the wilderness. We discussed blooming intervals, and how important they are for pollinators, and talked about the scarlet gilia, a unique flower that changes from bright crimson in early summer to white in early fall. This accommodates seasonal pollinators, where in the early season it aims to attract hummingbirds but in the fall it will attract the sphinx moth. Everyone agreed it was a cool adaptation!

By the time we had reached the old growth ponderosa pine trees everyone was ready for a snack and a short break. We compared the diversity of the forest floor in the dense and overgrown pine environment to the variety of plants seen in the aspen grove. We talked about the extreme fire danger in an overgrown canopy forest like this, and discussed the work of foresters to thin out the forests in our area. One of the students said she had visited a recent thinning area and was worried. It seemed like they had taken too many trees out, and the machines were making a mess of the forest. We talked about historical density, and the challenges of hand logging vs. machine logging. I explained that the numbers of trees being left were still much greater than the density of 200 years ago, and though hand logging isn't as messy, it is difficult and expensive to get the work done in a timely manner. At the rate catastrophic fires are raging through the West, there is no time to waste fixing the problem.



Getting the hang of it!

We continued on to find a perfect spot to relax, eat lunch, visit and play. This group revisited the color matching game by looking for the right shade of green or brown, then trying to find tiny bits of ballerina pink or neon green in small patches of lichen or crystallized minerals in a rock. We played a familiar game called “helium stick,” where the entire group tries to lift a tent pole over their head and lay it back down. Each person can only balance the tent pole on one outstretched finger. It sounds easy, but it’s called “helium stick” for a reason! If you don’t watch carefully the stick will zoom overhead in a flash.

Our final activity before returning to the bus was a game of camouflage. In this game, the predator animal must use its keen eyesight to spot its prey hiding in the surrounding area. Every time the predator counts to ten, the prey must move a little closer and find a place to hide. If any prey animal survives it can tag the predator while they are counting. The game ends and a new predator is chosen.



At long last it was time to return to the bus. We had been watching the weather carefully as the forecast showed a good chance of showers in the afternoon. But when we arrived back at the trailhead, the bus was not there. A little surprised, and after several calls to the bus barn, our ride finally arrived. Just as everyone settled into their seats and the bus pulled away, the raindrops began to spatter the windshield. Nothing like a little excitement to end the school year on a happy note.

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