

Wildlife Encounters Not Far From Home by Treven Hooker

On Saturday, August 13, 11 youth from the communities of Patagonia and Sonoita walked through the Sonoita Creek Preserve, a perennial water source that harbors an incredibly diverse range of plants and animals. The students were excited to get outside and beat the August heat among the endless shade from sycamore trees and cool running water.



Searching for tracks in Sonoita Creek.

The students, co-leader Steve Coleman, and I met at the Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center at 10 a.m. After the students arrived, I briefed them on the expedition. I split them into groups of four, and gave each group a pair of binoculars, animal/plant identification books, and a blank journal to draw and take notes. The expedition was also a competition, with the group who identified the most plants and animals winning a bag of Arizona Trail gear. I taught the students how to properly identify plants and animals, why drawing a specimen is more productive than taking a photo, and how to practice Leave No Trace ethics.

After the briefing, we drove to the trailhead on the north side of the creek, geared up, and began our adventure. The students immediately dove into the experience. Within minutes they found tracks of all kinds, from raccoons, birds, and possibly even an ocelot! I explained what a raptor was, and what perennial water systems do for the riparian life in the Southwest. We heard many birds and raptors, and saw a beautiful red-tailed hawk display near its nest. Down low, the water was full of fast swimming fish, nimble water bugs, and large crayfish, which the students did not hesitate to pick up, pet and analyze.

Down in the creek, the kids quickly removed their shoes and found themselves crawling under fallen trees that just barely left room underneath, up and over logs and debris from recent floods, and through tall grass that seemed to consume anyone who wandered into it. The participants saw deer and a large buck.

I encouraged them to use critical thinking skills, and to always question everything. As we journeyed through, the youth pushed their imaginations and developed amazing hypotheses to complicated questions. We analyzed roots on a bank that had become exposed from heavy flooding, whose outer skin was covered in orange color that did not look natural to its development. The students analyzed the difference between javelina tracks and deer tracks, debating which belong to who. We discussed water in the desert, and what



Exposed roots are evidence of recent flooding.

water systems like this one do for the environment. After a long hike, we sat quietly on an old dismantled bridge. The students were encouraged to listen, and discover wildlife that only becomes apparent while sitting in silence.

Afterward, one student made a keen observation: noticing that all the wildlife they saw resided far from human roads and infrastructure. So we discussed habitat disruption and destruction and what protected areas like Sonoita Creek do for wildlife. We discussed individual responsibility and ways to support our natural environment.

After three hours, we returned to the vehicles and back to the Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center. The students all had a blast, and showed off their sketches and pictures. We debriefed the expedition, and discussed natural systems and local environments. Perhaps most importantly, we talked about why we need wild places.



Identifying birds and enjoying the beautiful surroundings of the Sonoita Creek Preserve.

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