



## Gathering the Desert's Bounty in Oracle State Park by Treven Hooker

On September 1, 18 4<sup>th</sup> grade students from Mountain Vista Elementary in Oracle embarked on a mission to harvest prickly pear fruit on the Arizona Trail's Black Hills Passage north of Oracle. The students were incredibly excited for their adventure, and ready to use all the desert wildlife knowledge they learned with their teacher Julie Formo.

At approximately 8 a.m., we met to drive down a long dirt road to the Tiger Mine Trailhead. The day was beautiful. It was warm, but had enough sun-relieving clouds to let us enjoy a full day outdoors. When we arrived, the students and I made a large circle, and began to discuss the itinerary of the day. With parent chaperones as aids, the students were to collect big, red prickly pears from armored *Opuntia* cactus! The students were excited they had a dangerous job to do. We discussed desert safety, hiking etiquette, and appropriate outdoor behavior. The students were all very receptive and ready to go.

Enjoying their time outdoors discovering bugs, birds, and animals, the 4<sup>th</sup> graders found a comfortable spot to satisfy their well-deserved hunger. After a snack break, it was time for the harvest. Parents were enlisted to use



sticks to knock the pears safely from the prickly pear pads. Students were equipped with forks and, and were able to collect the pears by stabbing the fruit. Buckets were placed around the collected area, where students then had to drop the *tunas* into the bucket.

The entire operation was a success. I have never seen 4<sup>th</sup> graders so organized! The entire scene looked like a hill of ants, safely scattered around the desert landscape, collecting food to bring back to the hill. The students were enthusiastic, and filled two buckets with fruits much quicker than I had planned. And they loved every minute of it.

Before our departure, we discussed why we did not collect all the fruit from one plant or a whole area, and they understood the importance of leaving the fruit for the other animals to eat, and for the survival of the desert. By this point students had become very attached to our surroundings, and were sad to hike back to the van.



Upon returning to the classroom, students quickly pulled out identification books and were diligent to identify the plants and animals we saw out in the field. A group of students gathered around to talk about adaptations, and discussed a brown praying mantis we found on the trail camouflaged very well to look like a leaf.

Each student was very enthusiastic about our discoveries and fruit collection. Soon after the trip, the students and their teacher Julie Formo made prickly pear jam in the classroom. The students were truly able to witness the process of wild harvesting and processing, and each student went home with their own jar of jelly.



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