



## Exploring, Laughing and Learning on the Trail

by Treven Hooker

On September 9, 2016, 12 students from Mansfeld Middle School, their teacher Kirstin Bittle, and I began an adventure into the Santa Catalina Mountains. Our mission was to beat the heat, find some adventure, and discuss living in the backcountry versus living in the city on the General Hitchcock Trail.

The students were excited from the beginning. On the ride up the mountain we saw the Tucson Basin, sky island formations, and touched on climate change since the last ice age. It was not long before questions about the geological formation of the Santa Catalina Mountains started flying. We soon found ourselves in a deciduous forest, a stark contrast to the Sonoran Desert below.



As we exited the van, a thick scent of pine poured over us. Deep inhales from the students along with big smiles reassured me we were in the right place. We discussed safety, and some rules of the trail before handing out binoculars, journals, and identification books of the flora and fauna we might see along the way. I discussed journaling versus photography, and the advantages and drawbacks of each. I asked the students to draw the different homes belonging to animals in the forest. We all gathered around a wasp's nest to discuss its unique home, before drawing it in our journals.

The students became very enthusiastic, and their interest piqued higher than the mountain. We began our hike through the hills, following the trail through the water, over rocks, and around fallen trees. The first water flow was significant and the students halted immediately. Happiness and curiosity was abundant as they splashed through water, climbed large boulders, and peered through every nook and cranny. It took many pushes to remind the students we still had a whole trail to hike, and an even bigger forest to explore.

We stopped to use our critical thinking skills and analyze everything from fungi to Mexican jays, and animal trails to grubs nesting in a decaying log. They drew and journaled, photographed and discussed more than I could have imagined.

Noon came and we were presented with a beautiful clearing off-trail with fallen trees and friendly rocks inviting us for a lunch stop. I asked the students to find a quiet place to eat lunch alone. The youth were unsure of this insisted independence, but trusted the direction. With some reluctance each student found their spot, and soon the forest fell silent of children's laughter and gave way to the many sounds of the forest...like the voice of the running stream that wound its way down the mountain, or the loud jays that seemed to mimic the students' laughter. This time alone was golden.

Students used the time after lunch to reflect in their journals. When they were done, they found themselves perched on a large boulder. With technology left far behind, they found themselves bonding over laughter, stories, and shared experiences outdoors.

After hiking for a while longer down the trail, it was time to hike back to the van. One student shared that they “have never felt so happy.” The van ride down was full of energy as the students discussed their discoveries, slips into water, and memorable moments.

At the end, we said our goodbyes and shared disappointment for departure. I reminded them our adventures had only begun, and next month would bring another adventure into the great outdoors.



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