



From Peacemakers to Observant Scientists by Sabrina Carlson

On October 19, 2016 the 23 students of Mr. Doerfler's 5th grade class from Kinsey School took a trip to the peaks at Aspen Corner to view the changing leaves and cultivate their scientific observation skills.

On our last outing together, we had worked on our skills as peacemakers. How to be together and in the wilderness doing no harm to the environment and learning to calm our bodies and minds and notice the things we miss when we are busy talking or doing other things. On this outing, we built upon that foundation to begin using our newfound mindfulness to become highly observant of the world around us.



Looking for just the right shade.

After hiking 1.5 miles north on the AZ trail from Aspen Corner, we came together as a group to see what we could learn about this corner of the world. We began by looking for colors in nature. I passed out paint chip cards in all shades of every color and asked them to find something in nature as close to that color as possible. It is always fun to watch students first think that green, or brown will be easy, but magenta will be difficult. They soon learn that finding the exact shade of green might be harder than finding hot pink at the base of a leaf or soft pink in a rock's crystalline structure.

Next we set out on a nature scavenger hunt. We looked for things that were fuzzy, that rattles, for different kinds of pinecones, and sticks that could be squirrel pencils. Looking carefully for these details not only builds a love and appreciation for nature, but is the foundation of science observation skills. Each student was asked to bring one item back to the circle to share what they had found. One student brought a very large branch that was stripped of bark wondering if it could be a squirrel pencil that several squirrels shared. While it was much too large for that, we found unmistakable scrape marks on it that indicated deer or elk rubbing their antlers on it in the springtime. One student found the remains of a male pinecone that creates pollen in March, and another found two distinctly different pinecones. One was from a Douglas fir the other from a bristlecone pine.



Is it a limber pine? Or a ponderosa?

Last, we took our observation skills to the next level by using a dichotomous key to identify a few common trees in the area. We carefully checked needle length, number of leaves per petiole, and pinecone shape to determine which were limber pines, Douglas firs, bristlecones or ponderosas. The aspens of course, were easy to identify.

After our 1.5-mile hike back to the trailhead, we had a few minutes left until the bus arrived. So we thought about some of the traits of a good emergency shelter. It would be protected from the rain, have insulation from the cold, and be as comfortable as possible. The students were tasked with constructing an emergency shelter for a mouse. Something small but hopefully functional, if you happen to be really tiny. It was great fun to have the students present to each other and notice everyone's different approach.

Another gorgeous day of learning and enjoying one another's company.



The climbing rock.



This Seeds of Stewardship outing made possible with support from:

