



## Harvesting the Desert's Bounty

by Treven Hooker

On September 11, 2017, 20 students from Mountain Vista Elementary school embarked on a desert adventure with a mission to harvest prickly pear fruit on the Arizona Trail near the Tiger Mine Trailhead. The kids were beyond excited, and within

moments they had tongs in hand, 5 gallon buckets nearby, and an appetite for the vibrant purple fruit.

We unloaded from the school bus and were immediately greeted by a blistering sun. The students hardly seemed to mind, as they were ready to get into the thick of it. Before setting off, we sat in the shade and had a safety talk. We discussed awareness and response to greeting animal residents of this landscape. I was surprised to find that the students had great knowledge about desert animal awareness, from rattlesnakes to desert tortoise encounters. Co-leader Angel Breault and I demonstrated how to pick the prickly pear's fruit, and discussed the process in which we would collect them. Ethical harvesting practices were taught, such as generalized harvesting which prevented over-picking from a single area. Once everyone was sure they understood, we snapped a group photo at the trailhead, and started hiking north on the AZT.



We hiked for 15 minutes before finding ourselves in a prickly pear fruit forest. In two groups of ten, the students split up, one hiking farther up trail, and the others stayed put. Buckets remained near the trail, while students and staff ventured into the bush to harvest. Not one student got pricked by a cactus – an incredible accomplishment! In no time our buckets began to fill. The students did a superb job collecting unbroken and ripe fruit, and making sure no insects or desert critters made it in the bucket.

Although the fruit was our main attraction, student soon found a whole new focus. The desert community soon became obvious. First it was the nest of a cactus wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*) that captured the attention and imagination of the

students. The woven nest was mounted on top of a teddy bear cholla (*Cylindropuntia bigelovii*), protected by dangerous barbed thorns. I asked if the student had an idea as to why the wren adapted to build its nest this way? The students did not hesitate as they guessed the strategy to be a defense mechanism. The correctness of their answer had them excited to explore and search for more.

After two hours, two buckets of fruit, and plenty of sun, we began our hike back up the trail to our vehicles. We were all hesitant to leave, but the intense heat of the sun was a major motivator. Once we were back at the school, I asked the students if they would like to share about things they observed and learned. Eager hands flew into the air, and a rush of thoughts, observations and questions filled the room. It seems the students harvested more than just fruit, but a mass amount of experience, too. The excitement of the adventure was even sweeter than the fruit we collected.



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