Greater Outdoor Learning
by Treven Hooker

On October 27, 50 4th grade students from Coronado Elementary School participated in the second expedition of the semester to Coronado National Memorial. The big group of students were split up into three groups – Coatis, Gila Monsters and Elf Owls. Each group focused on a different goal of the Seeds of Stewardship program, such as experiential learning, phenological observations and recordings, and stewardship activities.

The Elf Owls were equipped with gloves, helmets, headlamps and trash bags. They hiked up the trail to Coronado Cave to discuss the formation of caves, the importance they provide as a refuge to wildlife, and its anthropological history. In the cave they worked hard picking up trash that people have left over the years. It did not take long before their bags were full and they were on their way back to the Visitor Center.

The Gila Monsters were equipped with paper, notebooks, colored pencils and pens. Kimberly Wentland, a NPS ranger at Coronado National Memorial, brought a display of replicated animal pelts, bones and tracks. With them, Kimberly described the local animals that live in the area, and the role they play in the greater ecosystem. The group then hiked an arroyo away from the Visitor Center, observing the current physical state of the landscape in relation to the season. Students observed both flora and fauna, as well as moisture, leaf color, and temperature. After a long hike and plenty of observation, students pulled out the art materials and recorded the physical appearance of the arroyo, or something specific within it. Similar recordings have been happening over an entire year, in the same arroyo, with some of the same objects. The students practiced great care while drawing and recording their observations.

The Coatis hiked to a smaller arroyo and focused on our five senses. First, we described what they were, then we attempted to isolate those senses and explore them individually. We scoured the wash for animals and plants to study with each independent sense. We found stick bugs, beetles, bumble bees and wasps, all friendlier than the other, and all offering wonderful sensory information. Once we practiced thoroughly using our senses, we into vehicles and drove to Montezuma Pass. There we had a safety talk and hiked to Montezuma’s Peak. Along the way we studied scat and tracks that were left behind by animals, practicing our observatory sense of sight.
We felt cholla, yucca, bear grass, rocks, and breezes, and practiced using descriptive language to explain what our sense of touch was giving us. We listened to the sounds of raptors and other birds calling into the wind, and listened to that wind bounce around in our ears. We smelled the flowers that lined the trail, and discussed how animals rely on that sense more than their sight! We found lemonade sumac berries and manzanita berries and other edibles with different flavors.

At the top, the Coati group found something they felt was unique, and described their object using their five senses, using as detailed descriptive language as possible. Students did a great job, and put so much thought, effort and bravery into their presentations. The excitement to share their personal observations extended past the presentations, and carried through the hike back to the pass. Along the way, students were exploring and describing every special thing they saw.

At the bottom, the groups joined back together, and in a large circle, concluded their individual experiences. We all shared our gratitude, appreciation, and excitement for the next and final expedition. Once the wrap-up was concluded, Coronado Elementary School loaded back up into the bus, and began their journey home. It was a wonderful day spent exploring, hiking, and learning in Coronado National Memorial.

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