



Great Desert Days with Imago Dei

by Treven Hooker

On November 6, 2017, 11 students from Imago Dei Middle School found a rich and rewarding adventure within Catalina State Park. This was the first expedition of the semester, and this group of youth was ready to explore the Sonoran Desert at the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains. Our mission was to play, explore, and learn about this desert ecosystem. I expected to have a wonderful experience out in this landscape, but what I did not expect was

the incredible capability and attention these students would provide.

Our hike began by circling up under a massive sycamore tree within Sutherland Wash. This *arroyo* was massive, providing space to run, play, and relax. Under the shade of this huge tree we discussed what it means to respect nature, the ethics of hiking, and what it means to be a steward. Then questions about the local ecology were asked, and students showed they had a good foundational understanding of our unique desert ecosystem. We discussed safety, like what is safe and unsafe play, behavior rules, and what to do if we see a snake (little did we know this one would come into play quickly).

After the talk, we hiked through a mesquite forest, winding our way through a narrow, winding trail. Our trail came to a junction with another smaller arroyo, and



this is where our adventure really began. Quick and careful maneuvers around and over rocks, ducking and fighting mesquite and acacia trees, and climbing through fallen trees, this hike put us to the test. The students handled this with ease. In fact, it was almost hard to keep up. With every step came another question like why the desert is so green, why the arroyo had water sometimes but not always, and what kinds of animals lived out here. The students absorbed the answers like thirsty sponges.

As we were moving, a student in front shrieked with a high pitch and a jump backwards. "Snake!" she exclaimed. I moved forward to assess the situation. In front of us was a three-foot western diamondback rattlesnake, coiled and watching our every move. The students gathered safely behind me, and together we watched the snake uncoil and travel away from us, up

the bank of the arroyo, then back down where it coiled with another smaller western diamondback rattlesnake. We observed the larger snake pulsing its body on the other, before moving off to the side and stretching its body long. It was something no one in the group had seen before, and something that held our attention for a long time.

We safely moved around the snakes, and continued our hike. The excitement and energy in which we were hiking with had our bellies growing for sustenance. We parked our bodies in the shade and devoured our lunch. During this process, I spotted something odd next to a rock. As I moved closer, I recognized its odd shape and became very excited. The students gathered around and observed a jaw bone with massive canine teeth, and a lot of flat premolars and molars. I asked the students what they thought this animal may be. "Coyote!" "Deer!" "Mountain Lion!" were guesses that were shouted. I told the students it was an ungulate that we had already talked about, and observed its



tracks in the soft soil. "Javelina!" was shouted out and satisfaction quickly gained by the group. I had never found such an intact mandible before, and the students had a great time observing, touching, and analyzing this treasure.

The students hiked this path farther than any group before them.

When we arrived at a point where only the smallest of bodies was capable of maneuvering through the dense foliage we turned and hiked back. On our return we saw seeing the javelina jaw, our snake friends, and all the massive saguaros that encouraged us along before. We returned to the Sutherland Wash, and there we raced like large desert mammals, loping and trotting along. We dug deep pits into the dirt, buried our feet, and searched for life along the banks. Once we were officially worn out, we gathered under the large tree again. There we closed our eyes, and remembered what we knew when we were under this tree the first time, then compared it to what we knew the second time. The students were eager to share their knowledge, new experiences, and favorite parts. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves, and were unhappy when it was time to leave. We waved goodbye to Catalina State Park, our new friends, and vowed to return soon.

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