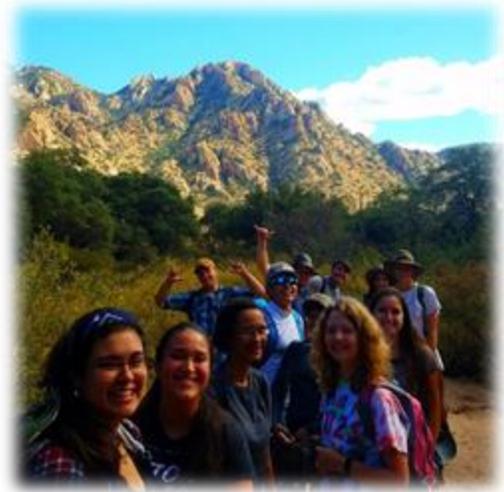




Dragoon Discoveries by Treven Hooker

On November 8, 2017, 13 students from Bisbee High School woke on a brisk desert day ready for a backcountry adventure. Our mission was to

explore the Dragoon Mountains, play on the beautiful granite monoliths, and study the landscape for evidence of local wildlife. Hiking a medium sized loop, the students had an opportunity to see open grass and mesquite fields, pine and juniper forest, and a riparian zone. This was the second expedition of the semester, and it proved to be an experience that would change the standard for their expeditions forever.



The students and staff were dropped off at the trailhead, where the vehicles were then taken to the end point. We were now obligated to hike through *arroyos* and canyons to weave around mountains in order to to our destination (and back to school) on time. We began with an introduction into basic wildlife tracking. In a seated circle, we practiced imprinting and identifying canine, feline, javelina, and deer tracks. We discussed human's capability for pattern recognition, and why visual tracking is not only arguably unique to humans, but how it has helped us become such a successful species. We discussed the biodiversity of the area, and what plants

and animals we might find. It is important to talk about the ethics of tracking, and what our purpose in tacking is. Our goal was to observe wildlife, but never to disrupt. Thus, reading the prints made by wildlife is next to perfect. Once the group assured they understood the information, we shouldered our backpacks and began our hike.

The trail took us through gorgeous yellow grasslands, dotted by mesquite and oak trees, ocotillo, acacia, and agave. Suddenly from the edge of the blanket like grass rises massive rocks and mountains, shaped like crude hand shaped balls of clay. Granite rock is especially grippy, giving humans lizard-like confidence while on its surface. The temptation to climb and play on this rock was too much to resist, and soon the whole group was leaping, climbing, and running through the spherical stone labyrinth. This type of movement become popular, as catclaw acacia grew in thickets too tight to follow the actual trail. The only opportunity to make it to the vehicles was to go around and over more boulders. No one was complaining.

On the other side of the acacia forest, an arroyo provided access of a different kind. Students gathered here for lunch in a wonderfully shaded area. We had now hiked well into the mountains, giving us a view into the canyon which provided our way out. The sand offered a prime substrate for tracking, and when lunch was finished we moved out in a neat line, keeping our eyes open and scanning for any odd-looking impression. Many tracks were found, including raccoon, striped skunk, and coyote. It was the rather large mountain lion prints that halted us in our own tracks. Two well-placed prints were measured and compared to reference cards, giving us the unarguable conclusion that this indeed was a mountain lion. Not far away was an even better bobcat print sunk deep into the soil. This had the students livid, fulfilling an unattached hope of turning myth into truth. Seeing all of the different tracks, like a large trail left by a snake, allowed the students to see the vast community and popularity of the area.



We hiked the arroyo to the entrance of the large canyon we saw from a distance at lunchtime. Here, the riparian forest was full and lush. With water still in pools, the avian life was noisy, alerting the area to our presence. This route provided quick escape from these enchanting mountains, bringing us back to the vehicles almost too soon. The Dragoon Mountains provided a wonderful venue for learning, playing, and living in this wild western landscape.

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