Restoring and Reading Trail
by Sabrina Carlson

On November 16, 2017, five students from Flagstaff High School's Alpine Program traveled to the Double Springs Campground to access the Mormon Lake Passage (Passage 29) of the Arizona National Scenic Trail for a trail improvement project.

The Mormon Lake passage has been getting a great deal of attention and work this fall with tread improvements and reroutes where necessary to fix damage and erosion. The students were excited to be a part of this massive repair effort. One of the most powerful pieces of our particular brand of service learning through trail building and public lands stewardship is how real, necessary, and technical it is. It is rare that adults trust children to do such complex projects. The added knowledge that they were a vital piece of a larger project that our entire agency was invested in gave them a greater sense of purpose and pride.

The Flagstaff High School Alpine Program students have made a study this year of an assortment of issues around public lands use, planning and politics as well as the process and design of sustainable and enjoyable trails. Having already gone through the theoretical process of planning, designing, and modeling trails in class, it was a practical next step in their learning to put that work into practice. A big emphasis for the day was learning to read a trail and think like water. If water is on this trail, will it run off, or stay on the trail? Is this drainage likely to be effective at shuttling water into the pine duff, or not? If a drain isn’t working, how can we fix it? If a trail is cupping in one spot and not another, what needs to change to fix the drainage issues on the more damaged areas? By the end of the day, the students were highly skilled at evaluating a piece of trail to decide what, if anything, needed to be done to make it function better and sustain the repairs for the long term.

The section of trail we were repairing had a number of steep descents into drainages that were creating sections of extreme erosion, exposed rock, and unstable tread conditions. Several large drains had to be built and shaped to handle the infrequent but intense precipitation events common in Northern Arizona. Students also worked to remove loose rock and restore soil to the trail where appropriate.
After working hard on tread repair and drainage improvement, we all met back up for lunch and delicious cookies.

It was a super productive day and the students learned so much about hydrology, trail engineering and how empowering it is to volunteer on our public lands.

This outing was made possible with support from Arizona Trail Association members, donors and grant funds from: