Wildlife Encounters
by Sabrina Carlson

November 9, 2017, eighteen students from Peaks School 7th grade visited Picture Canyon in Flagstaff for a 3 mile hike, intersecting with the Arizona Trail Elden Mountain Passage (Passage 32).

It was an unseasonably warm day to enjoy this natural and cultural wonder in our city. Before descending toward the Rio we talked about the history of Picture Canyon and its recent past as an unofficial city dump. Until the early 2000’s this beautiful and archaeologically important area was filled with garbage. Old refrigerators, cars, cups and other debris filled the waterway and surrounding area and weeds choked out all native vegetation. But a concerned group of citizens recognized the value of this place and set about restoring it as an encounter with nature and history within our city. We emphasized the concept of “leaving a legacy” as something we will all do. Do we want to leave a legacy of positive change and improvement? Or one of destruction and degradation.

We hiked down to the waterfall where we saw the first petroglyph. A small Antelope on the opposite canyon wall. Students asked many questions from how the petroglyph got so high on the canyon wall to how far down the Rio was from the top.

We continued our hike down towards the bridge through the oak and ponderosa canopy. Red tailed hawks circled overhead and nuthatches and flickers flitted from tree to tree. In the soft dry dust of the trail, we spotted an unusual track. A bit like a racoon, but with much wider finger pads. Our general tracks and scat field guide suggested possibly opossum, but as those are unknown in Northern Arizona it may more likely have been a coati.

Near the creekside there were endless tracks in the soft mud. Racoon, porcupine and elk were easily identifiable. Minnows could be seen dancing about in the pool below and non-native crayfish sat in wait for a tasty snack. The students had never seen a crayfish before and shouted “Look! A lobster!”
Crossing over to the other side of the bridge we soon spotted a garter snake crossing the trail which one of the parent volunteers gently picked up to invite the students to examine it more closely. Several horned lizards were spotted and many, many more birds. The theme of the day seemed to be wildlife.

We made a visit to the petroglyph panels where we observed and reflected on the work of ancient people.

We closed out the day with some games and solo exploration of the area. It was an exciting day and I’m sure that little snake will be talked about for years to come.

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