



Mezmerized by the Wonder of Wetlands by Treven Hooker

On March 30, 2017, 18 4th grade students from Mountain Vista Elementary School and their teacher Julie Formo set out to explore the wild 7B Ranch near Mammoth. 7B Ranch is a 3,000-acre nature preserve along the San Pedro River. The students mission was to analyze and compare the differences between the dense mesquite *bosque*, and Oracle's typical high desert biome. When I arrived at the school the students were already on the bus with their excitement hardly contained.

It is a half-hour drive to the town of Mammoth, where a seemingly endless forest of mesquite trees lies on the northern boundary. With wide green leaf tops, the forest's canopy presented a euphoric reaction from the students. We arrived at the trailhead and began to talk about the area, and our Leave No Trace approach to outdoor exploring. We discussed the process of biodegradation and how that process is unique to each biome and ecosystem. We understood that a lack of water in any desert region makes biodegradation slow and difficult.

We wandered through dense dirt trails softened by carpets of tall, green grass. Our progress was subtle and slow, as we stopped to inspect every flower, insect, bird and lizard. Funnel web spiders and tarantulas spread across the ground like glitter. Students practiced quiet movement, communication, and listening as we moved along the trail. With such intention and focus, we were surprised when Celeste Andresen glided out of the forest and greeted us! Celeste works for the Nature Conservancy and is the caretaker of the 7B Ranch where she knows every pebble in the forest.



Immediately, Celeste showed us wonderful discoveries like a complete skeleton of a great horned owl. Students gathered around to analyze the adaptive qualities of the owl. As they analyzed its beak, talons and massive eye sockets, we played detective by trying to understand how this owl might have perished. Students were sure it was locked into a talon war with another owl, but after investigating it more they came to the conclusion that it was probably taken down by a bobcat. Celeste then told us about a wetland that we should explore, so with great enthusiasm, she led the way.

After walking a long two-track road, we found ourselves at a lively dead end full of thick, tropical foliage. Celeste described the wetland area and its delicate nature. The area is protected because it harbors the endangered lowland leopard frogs and Sonoran mud turtles.



For lunch, students sat in a field under a merciful tree canopy, next to the sweet-smelling mud of the wetland. We took five minutes to eat in silence, eavesdropping on the conversations of birds and crickets. After eating, the kids flew off, exploring anything their eyes could reach, hands could touch, noses could smell, and ears could hear. Lowland leopard frogs and Sonoran mud turtles made a healthy appearance, giving the youth a rare experience.

None of these students have experienced a landscape like this before. A solar heated spring poured from a PVC pipe allowed the students a warm head bath before we gathered to leave. Muddy, wet, and grass stained, the students stood before the landscape admiring the wonderful classroom where we had spent the day. We spent a few more moments in silence, then with loud gratitude we thanked the wonderful wetland! A slow and observant hike back took us to the van. This adventure would be another experience we would remember forever.



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