



Exploring the Natural Wonders Within Sonoita Creek

by Treven Hooker

On April 1, 2017, four students from the Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center and their mentor Steve Coleman gathered for another beautiful spring day adventure to the Patagonia/Sonoita Creek Preserve. The creek is 873 acres total, and provides a lush riparian forest almost unmatched in biological diversity. Even with its proximity, youth from Patagonia rarely if ever visit the preserve, making this trip one of discovery.

With backpacks full of lunch, water, and snacks, we loaded into the van and began our mission. Full of green grasses, ferns and vines, the preserve was displaying its wild nature. Massive cottonwood trees, some as old as 130 years, towered tall. Their leaves glittered between neon and dull green as the wind spun their delicate leaves.

Our hike followed a winding trail through "too good to be true" grass, as we desert people call it. From our narrow footpath, grey hawks were heard singing somewhere in the forest. Questions about the wildlife and their ecosystem began, and we discussed what might be living in this paradise. When we made it to the water, our shoes and socks were removed. Now the real fun was about to begin.

We submerged our feet in the cool water of the creek. Underneath the thick algae swam inch-long fish in what seemed like groups of thousands, and insects that moved with robotic locomotion. On the surface, hundreds of thousands of water striders traveled in a playful manner. We discussed microenvironments, and spent time examining all of the small habitats and ecosystems. It was because of this that our movements were slow and careful, with focused intention not to destroy or disrupt any homes.



Down the stream through dense foliage from above and below we spotted a lone great blue heron hunting 100 yards ahead. It walked cautiously and slow, keeping an eye on us at all times. It is rare and almost alien to see something of its size walking around southern Arizona. The students practiced their silent walking, and attempted to get as close as possible. It took less than ten seconds before a misstep made a splash, and sent the heron flying far down the creek.

Where two cottonwoods had fallen, a perfect resting place was created, and a tiny sandy beach encouraged us to take a break. Students unpacked their lunches, devoured food, and relaxed under creek-cooled desert air. Once the food properly settled, exploration of the creek began once again.

We adventured further up the creek, moving slowly and steady. The calls of an excited grey hawk grew louder. Although we could hear the raptor, I did not expect to see it. Sure enough, around a small bend, perched on a cottonwood branch was a large grey hawk. It stood tall, with a heavy chest and a fierce glare pointed right at us. Then, once again, it began to scream over the canopy. The students watched as the hawk then dove from its perch and soared indecisively out of sight.

We made our way back to the vehicles on the dirt road and loaded into the van. The students were thrilled by the adventure, hailing it as the best yet, which is a statement said every time.



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