



# The Bear Claw



The Sandia Mountain Natural History Center Newsletter

The mission of SMNHC is to work within New Mexico communities to develop an ecologically literate citizenry.

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## Students Research SMNHC Ecosystem

This fall, students from New Futures High School and Prince of Peace Lutheran School have been busy doing real, hands-on, place-based science at SMNHC! Prince of Peace 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students chose to split into groups, each observing a different aspect of the ecosystem. Group 1 captured flying insects in the Meadow, to see how populations change through the seasons. Group 2 collected data from arthropod pitfall traps in our newly thinned forest area, while Group 3 collected the same data in a non-thinned area. Group 4 observed and identified birds at the Mud Spring, to track populations through the seasons and start a data set which can be studied over years to come.

New Futures students identified and counted plants in quadrats and arthropods in pitfall traps, comparing populations in thinned and non-thinned forest areas through different seasons. They also started a project to capture and identify small

mammals in thinned forest and meadow areas. These students will be analyzing their own data to see what questions they can answer about our ecosystem.

For the spring, we hope to recruit more student scientists to this exciting program. A fantastic new opportunity for high school students in Albuquerque Public Schools is to earn up to *one credit per year* by engaging in an environmental conservation service learning project! Students should talk with their counselor about enrolling in these Job Mentorship or Community Service courses. Students can get credit for participating in the bio-monitoring project, as well as *pay through the city!* The State Parks Outdoor Classroom transportation grant money is nearly gone, but they are still offering it to APS Valley Cluster Schools. These applications must be received by the end of January.

So drop us an email or give us a call at 281-5259 to get involved! -Amy White

**COOL FACTS:** A skulk, lead, earth or leash is a group of foxes. Those and rabbits (a warren), coyotes (a band), turkeys (a posse), owls (a parliament) and bobcats have lately been leaving evidence of themselves around the center!

## In the spotlight...



Say, was that a fox or a coyote?! I asked that question one morning as I saw a medium-small wild dog dashing down the road by SMNHC. Gray foxes have a lot of the same coloration as coyotes and it is a little difficult to tell the difference when you don't see them often. They have the same "grizzled" color on back and tail, and the rusty-gold/rufous color on their legs. Both have 16 inch tails, but here's where the distinction is easier: A coyote's head plus body measurement (minus the tail), is about 32-37 inches in length; gray foxes ranges from 21-29 inches. That's roughly ten inches shorter; giving a lot more tail to body ratio! That lovely full fox tail sports a black streak its full length as well; coyotes have an unmarked tail except for the black tip. The short-legged grey fox stands an average of 14 inches at the shoulder and can weigh from 7 to 15 pounds; a coyote with longer legs and twice the speed, can weigh from 20 to 50 pounds. Also helpful for I.D. is a sort of white bib on a gray fox's neck.

Gray foxes are omnivores and eat available fruits and seeds to supplement their diet of rodents, birds and insects. They are crepuscular, which means they are most active pre-dawn and early evening and usually on bright moonlit nights, but they can sometimes be seen during the day browsing for food.

Males and females choose the same mates year after year, and though "dad" is not allowed in the den after the kits are born, he stays around for several weeks to help feed the family.

Gray foxes are actually appreciated by farmers because they prefer woody, brushy habitat and help control rodents. Their red fox counterparts, however, who are happy in open country, are more likely to come closer to farmyards and the chicken coop.

-Julie Hall

## Blind Leading the Blind: Walking the Tight-Rope Together

A blindfolded figure feels with a foot for the next step on a wire 40ft above the ground. Voices drift up through the air: "Lean forward!" "You got it - one more step!" "Reach out your hand!" Her partner (also blindfolded) grasps her hand and guides it to the rope at the center of the course: a spot to rest, catch your breath, and plan. "O.K. How about you go first and I'll support you until you reach the far rope. Then you can bring me across." The two figures are Julie Hall and Alycia Knutson. Guiding from the ground and waiting for their turn, are the other SMNHC staff.

More encouraging shouts from the ground: "You all can do it!" "Take your time." After three tries and misses they persist and reach the goal: "Slap the pole! You're there!" accompanied by exhilarated shouts and whooos!

This is just one snapshot from the SMNHC Instructor's day at Santa Fe Mountain Center. Through a trade with Santa Fe Mountain Center (SMNHC staff taught a couple ecology workshops for their staff), the SMNHC staff were able to participate in Santa Fe Mountain Center's teambuilding initiatives and "ropes" course program. It was a fun, productive day which included running games and group tasks on specially-designed equipment (including walking on wires) both near the ground and high in the air. All the activities were created and implemented in a way that developed teamwork, understanding, and leadership skills.

After each activity (and often during), the staff talked about what happened - difficulties, successes, assets and weaknesses of the group - and applied this to our work at the SMNHC.

The SMNHC has enjoyed working with the Santa Fe Mountain Center, and looks forward to continuing this relationship in mutually beneficial ways. Santa Fe Mountain Center is truly a world-class organization, leading excellent therapeutic wilderness, wilderness adventure, personal and organizational growth, and public health programs. They work with many "at-risk" populations, as well as other groups. We are extremely lucky to have them nearby. More on the Santa Fe Mountain Center at [www.santafemc.org](http://www.santafemc.org). Thanks, Santa Fe Mountain Center! -Susan Davis



The Sandia Mountain Natural History Center (SMNHC) is a natural history & environmental education facility located on the east side of the Sandia Mountains in Cedar Crest, New Mexico. The SMNHC is owned by Albuquerque Public Schools and operated by the New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science.



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