



From the Desk of Alyson Mack
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Teens Go Backpacking at Desert NWR!

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This summer, ten teens from Las Vegas, Pahrump, and Amargosa Valley had an adventure they'll never forget.



The group embarks on their 5 day adventure into Deadman Canyon.
Photo by Alyson Mack.

The teens participated in the very first *Natural Leaders Desert Backpack* trip – a new program offered for teens ages 15-18 at Desert National Wildlife Refuge. The program was created to give teens experience and training in backcountry skills, conservation career awareness, and environmental leadership. Ten participants were selected through an application process which considered their leadership qualities, outdoor experience, and personal goals.



Successful completion of the "human knot" teambuilding challenge. *Photo by Hayley Krawitz.*

While all the teens shared an interest in the outdoors, not all were experienced campers. One participant, Keitaro, 17, came with very limited experience outside of the city. He wrote, "I want to change the fact that I have next to zero experience camping and backpacking. I want to open my world as much as possible and understand as much as I can about it."

The group was first introduced during a pre-trip parent meeting to discuss trip logistics and answer questions. A week later they hit the trail. Donning packs with sleeping bags, water filtration systems, and enough food for 5 days, the group began their trek through Deadman Canyon. The rocky trail was a gradual, 6-mile ascent from lower elevation Joshua tree habitat, through pinyon-juniper woodland, and ending in ponderosa pine forest at about

8000' elevation. Along the way, the group met with Desert NWR Archaeologist Spencer Lodge at an ancient Native American roasting pit and learned about how these cultures successfully lived off the land.

Each night, the group camped under the stars near the historic Hidden Forest Cabin where water trickled from a tiny natural spring – the only water source for miles. The spring attracts an exciting diversity of wildlife including mule deer, hummingbirds, tarantula hawk wasps, and more. Everyone took turns filtering their

drinking water from the spring each day, and helped prepare meals with camp stoves. Unfortunately no campfires were allowed at the site due to a refuge fire ban – wildfires are a serious concern at Desert NWR in the summer.

On the third day, the group hiked towards Hayford Peak at 9,912' elevation. The hike led through beautiful bristlecone pine forests with stunning vistas of the surrounding mountains. The 5-mile round trip hike was strenuous and took most of the day to complete. Despite the challenges, Jessica, 17, was glad she did it. "The view near the top was so worth it," she said. "You could see the desert and mountains for miles and miles." For Amber, 18, the hike helped her gain self-confidence. "Hiking Hayford was really hard, but it was my favorite part of the trip," she said. "It's cool to know that I can do it if I have to."



Refuge Archaeologist Spencer Lodge talks about a native American roasting pit. *Photo by Anica Mercado.*



Refuge GIS Specialist Matt Ball teaching backcountry navigation and geocaching. *Photo by Alyson Mack.*

Matt Ball, GIS Specialist for the Desert Complex, met the group on the fourth day for a lesson in backcountry navigation. He showed them how to use a topographical map and compass to orient and taught them a few tricks for determining direction without a compass. He then passed out GPS units and everyone worked in teams to navigate through a "natural" geocache course. Joel, 18, had never heard of geocaching before and asked Matt a lot of questions. "It was really cool to see his face light up when he was talking about geocaching," Matt said. "He discovered a new passion – something he was good at and really enjoyed."

Other trip activities included a night hike, astronomy, plant identification, animal tracking, radio telemetry techniques, and a land management debate. They also received hands-on lessons in Leave No Trace ethics and learned how to cook, go to the bathroom, dispose of waste, sleep, and hike in the backcountry without leaving an impact.

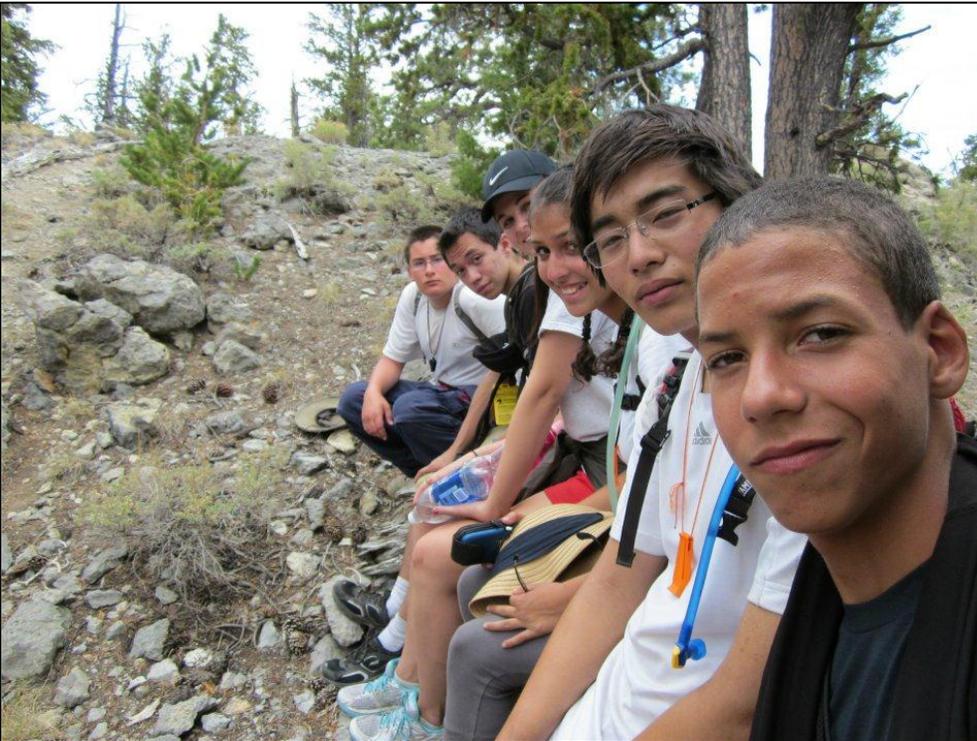
The trip was led by Ash Meadows NWR Ranger Alyson Mack, Desert NWR Ranger Anica Mercado, and Hayley Krawitz – program director with the Boojum Institute for Experiential Education. A cooperative agreement with the Boojum Institute provided staff assistance, gear, and trip planning for Refuge staff. Trips of this nature normally cost around \$600 per participant, which can be a deterrent for some families. Thankfully, all trip expenses were paid through a Region 8 Connecting People with Nature grant, which allowed the teens to participate free of cost.



On the way to Hayford Peak, elevation 9,912 feet.
Photo by Alyson Mack.

Overall, the trip produced a lot of sweat, a lot of laughter, and a lot of new experiences. For Nathan, 15, his favorite part of the trip was making new friends. “It was cool to see how such a diversity of people bonded and formed a friendship in such a short time,” he said. “It was nice to meet people with common interests in the outdoors.”

Would they do it again? Amanda, 15, would. “It’s a different experience that I think everyone should try at least once in their lifetime,” she said. “I’ve learned a lot and now I’m taking it back to share.” ■



The group started out as strangers, but left as friends. *From left to right: Nathan, Joel, Amber, Amanda, Keitaro, and Darius. Photo by Alyson Mack.*

View more trip photos on
Desert National Wildlife
Refuge’s Facebook page:
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