

# An Inside Look at the Outdoor Experiences Program

by Elin Ljung

“I am not going in that water.”

“Do we have to get our hands wet?”

“Why are we looking at bugs? Bugs are gross.”

These were some of the comments I heard down at lower Lee Vining Creek on a late August afternoon as a group of kids from Pasadena dubiously considered the cold water flowing toward Mono Lake. As part of the Mono Lake Committee’s Outdoor Experiences (OE) Program, these kids had come to spend five days in the

Mono Basin, five days full of hiking, spending time together, and learning about where their water comes from. Kristie Reddick, OE Co-Coordinator, reassured the kids that they didn’t have to get wet if they didn’t want to.

“Here, I’ll go in first, and you can watch me. Carlos, will you help me get the bug hotel out of the water?” The kids watched with looks of curiosity and disbelief as Kristie waded right into the creek. With Carlos’ help from shore, she pulled a mesh bag full of leaves out of the water and brought it, dripping, back to the group.

“That’s a bug hotel?” asked Fattavia doubtfully, wrinkling her nose at the soggy mess.

“It sure is,” said Kristie, “Invertebrates that live in the water like to hide in old decaying leaves that gather along the sides of the stream. Let’s see if any of these guys want to come out.” She placed the leaf pack into a white plastic tray with some water at the bottom, and instantly, several little creepy crawlies scrambled out of the leaves. The kids bent over the tray eagerly to see.

“Whoa, cool! You caught lots of them!”

“They’re fast!”

“What are they called?”

Kristie passed around small aquatic invertebrate field guides. “Well, let’s find out,” she said. After separating out an invertebrate for everyone’s individual tray, she told them to look closely at their bug and then try to match it with the pictures in the field guide. “Notice things like the shape of its body, how many breathing tubes it has...”

“Mine has a house!” squealed Jessica, flipping through her



Outdoor Experiences Coordinator Kristie Reddick examines bugs from Lee Vining Creek with the Southern California community group NATHA.

field guide. “I think it’s a caddisfly!”

“You’re right,” Kristie told her, and then turned her attention to Carlos and Fattavia, who were deliberating about the differences between a stonefly and a mayfly. For half an hour the kids were absorbed in identifying their bugs. They peppered Kristie with questions, traded their invertebrates for new ones from the leaf pack, and helped each other when they were stumped. They had forgotten about the dirt and the hot sun and getting

their hands wet—those bugs were fascinating.

Carlos, Fattavia, and Jessica were part of a group of kids that had come up to the Mono Basin to participate in the Outdoor Experiences Program, a part of the Mono Lake Committee’s work that remained nearly invisible to me during my time as an intern last summer. Co-Coordinators Santiago Escruceria and Kristie Reddick spent most of their time out at Cain Ranch, the OE headquarters, and only popped into the main office in Lee Vining a few times each week. In order to get a better idea of how the program worked, I had a chance to tag along with Kristie, Santiago, and Herley Jim Bowling, the program’s Southern California-based coordinator, for the NATHA (Neighbors Acting Together Helping All) group that visited in mid-August.

After all the kids had piled out of the van and the food had been unloaded into fridges and cupboards, Santiago called everyone into the living room for the opening circle. Each of the six kids held a large blue plastic cup full of water, which they set down carefully as Santiago welcomed the group to the Mono Basin and went over the week’s schedule. The kids’ eyes widened at the mention of a night hike (without flashlights!), canoeing out on Mono Lake, and a hike up in Yosemite that would take all day. They would also be sleeping outside in the front yard during their stay! Several kids looked a little nervous—I could tell that this was something new.

Santiago began to go over the rules for the week. “One of the first rules here at Cain Ranch is to drink a lot of water,” he said. “We want you to try to drink six to eight cups of water

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*Drinking lots of water in the Mono Basin is a crucial lesson made fun with games and contests as a part of the OE Program.*

every day, and we'll all start right now. Everybody, pick up your cup and drink all that water!" As we all downed our glasses of water, Angel asked, "Why do we have to drink so much water?" George, sitting next to him, added, "Yeah, at home I just drink soda."

"Well, when you're in the Mono Basin, you're in the desert, which is very dry," Santiago explained. "You also came up many feet in elevation from Pasadena to here, so you are closer to the sun! It's important to drink a lot of water because it will keep you healthy while you visit this hot and dry place." Some kids nodded, while others looked as if they wanted a Coke instead. Santiago and Herley Jim went on to ask the kids how they could tell if they were getting dehydrated.

"Do you get a headache?" asked Angel.

"And sometimes you feel sick?" added Fernanda in a shy voice.

"Yes, those are both signs that you need to drink more water," Santiago nodded. "If any of you feel a headache or like you are getting sick, come and tell me or Kristie or Herley Jim. Also if your lips feel chapped, that can mean you need more water as well."

As we went over the other rules and talked about the activities for the next day, I could see many of the kids get less nervous and more excited about their Mono Basin visit.

"Hey, do you guys want to catch some bugs yourselves?" Kristie asked when all the invertebrates from the leaf packs had been identified. The kids carried their trays down to the creek and carefully tipped their bugs back into the water. They followed Kristie downstream a ways to where the creek opened up into a wide, cobbly channel. "All you need to do is pick up a nice big rock from underwater and look underneath it," Kristie said. "Jessica, do you want to help me?" Jessica waded out to stand next to Kristie in the water, and they lifted a smooth mossy rock from the creek bed.

All of a sudden, Jessica shrieked and dropped the rock back into the water. "I felt something move!" she said, grinning at Kristie and wiping her hands nervously on her pants. "Did you? That was

probably one of the same invertebrates we just looked at from the leaf packs," Kristie explained. "Let's try again." This time, they were able to find a stonefly scurrying around on the rock, and brought it over to show Carlos and Fattavia.

After a few tries of turning over the rocks she could reach from shore, Fattavia's foot slipped into the water. At first she looked mortified and pulled it out, but then shrugged and waded all the way in. "Now I don't have to worry about getting wet," she noted. "I'm already wet!"

As the kids inspected rock after rock, a four-wheeler drove down to the edge of the creek and paused before roaring across in a cloud of spray and exhaust. Jessica looked at Herley Jim in horror and asked, "Can he do that?" Herley Jim told her that yes, that four-wheeler was allowed to cross the creek, even though it hurt the animals living in the water. "Hey!" Jessica shouted at the disappearing vehicle, "You're killing all our bugs!"

Carlos stuck to the shore and looked around under the willows. "Kristie!" he called, "I want to find a leech. How can I find a leech?" Kristie waded over to him and the two of them examined the rocks carefully until she spotted one. "Do you see that little worm?" she asked him. He squinted at the rock, but then his eyes widened as he saw the leech. "Huh. It's smaller than I thought it would be," he said.

Kristie left Carlos to his own leech hunting and waded over to me, grimacing. "My feet are numb," she remarked, and then said, "Aren't they doing well?" They certainly were. These city kids who, just an hour earlier, had been skeptical about getting their hands wet, were now absorbed in discovering the creek on their own. I knew that once they went back to Pasadena, all of them would remember looking for bugs in the creek on a summer afternoon, or hiking through the forest at night, or canoeing on Mono Lake, or scaling the face of Lumbert Dome way up in the mountains. They would remember their Outdoor Experiences week with the Mono Lake Committee for years to come. ❖

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