

READING THE LANDSCAPE

"But the competence of the eyes isn't the issue. The distinction lies in how those eyes are deployed. You see, but you do not observe."

- Sherlock Holmes (via the pen of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

To a trained observer, the landscape of Catalina Island is like a book, waiting to be read. Sherlock Holmes had it right. If you really want to be an observer, you need to put your mind to it. And when you do, the rewards can be great.

The best guides and ecologists consider themselves trained observers. They never just hike a trail or drive down a road. Their eyes are always scanning the horizon for movement, looking for things that appear out of place, or glancing at the tops of telephone poles or wires for the birds that are bound to perch there.

As an armchair naturalist, you may have already found yourself looking at the world differently - observing and not just seeing. Here are a few tips to take your game to a whole new level in the wildlands of Catalina, or even on the streets of Avalon.

The land is important to noticing nature. Slope and aspect can dramatically change habitats. Angling to the South gives you more light, heat and more evaporation, among other things. South slopes tend to be dryer and less lush. Angling north gives you less light, cooler environments and less evaporation, leading to greener and more lush environments.

When observing landscapes across Catalina, it's really easy to see how slope (how steep things are) and aspect (which way the land is angled) influence habitat. The great thing about reading the landscape is that it's very easy to get started, and once you become involved, it's hard not to read it. And the longer you keep at it, the better you get. The better you get, the more you see. The other thing about reading the landscape is that nature is always a good read, with puzzles constantly revealing themselves.

For instance, recently near El Rancho Escondido, observers of the landscape noticed a clump of vegetation that stood out. It wasn't like anything else in the area. They looked for clues as to why.

The trees in the area were cottonwoods and willows, both of which occur in wet areas. Hmmm. So there must be extra water there. Why? An examination of the lay of the land showed that an almost perfectly straight line where the vegetation went back to normal Catalina landscape.

Upon closer observation, the straight line was actually an embankment. The area was an old dam that must have filled in over the years! The observers made a note to look into the history of the area for confirmation. Prior to that day, the observers had driven past that valley a hundred times and never really had "seen" it.

And the good stuff isn't always at the big landscape level. The technique works on all scales. Another time, leaving the Haypress area, observers saw a bunch of pine cones on the road. Because they were keyed in to the idea of observing, instead of just driving by, they stopped to take a look. Many of the cones had been chewed on, no doubt by Catalina California ground squirrels, which were trying to get at the seeds. But most of the cones hadn't been eaten. Hmmm.

The squirrels must be climbing these trees and knocking down cones, then going to the ground to eat them. The thought occurred that the ground squirrels might be smart enough to be intentionally rolling the cones into the road so cars could run over them and liberate the seeds. The odds might be against that, but, it does make one wonder. And on it goes.

When you make the commitment to really observe the world as you move through it, you open yourself to an accumulation of rich and interesting experiences, puzzles and deductions. Over time, these experiences begin to define you as a naturalist in the same way that Sherlock Holmes' powers of deduction defined him as a detective.

Whether you evolve from a mere eco-Watson to a Sherlock is up to you. It all begins as you hone your ability not just to look, but to really see.



Seeing and Observing, Too - The Catalina Island Conservancy's Education Department runs a variety of programs to benefit kids and adults alike, many of them led by School Programs Specialist Rich Zanelli, far right. Courtesy Catalina Island Conservancy.