



U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Upper Snake River District  
400 West F Street  
Shoshone, Idaho 83352-1522

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# SHARING *the* PAST

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ADVENTURES IN THE PAST  
Cultural Resource Information Series • Number 3  
Bureau of Land Management

# SHARING THE PAST

The *Sharing the Past* exhibit and brochure are produced through cooperation of the Bureau of Land Management and the Idaho Museum of Natural History. It was produced in response to the *Adventures in the Past* program which is designed to increase awareness of archaeological resources on public lands in Idaho by providing in-house museum exhibits, portable displays, and public access to displays. *Sharing the Past* display is being complemented with exhibits at the Herrett Museum in twin Falls and the Idaho Museum of Natural History in Pocatello.

## **Funding was provided by the following:**

Bureau of Land Management  
College of Southern Idaho

## **Project participants include:**

Herrett Museum  
Bureau of Land Management  
University of Colorado  
Fort Hall  
Washington State Parks

## **Additional information on the *Adventures in the Past* program can be obtained from:**

District Archaeologist  
Shoshone District  
Bureau of Land Management  
400 West F Street  
Shoshone, Idaho 83352

## **Additional information on archaeology in southern Idaho can be obtained from any of the following:**

Herrett Museum	Idaho Museum of Natural History
College of Southern Idaho	Box 8096
P.O. Box 1238	Idaho State University
Twin Falls, Idaho 83303	Pocatello, Idaho 83209
Idaho State Historical Society	Idaho Archeology Society, Inc.
210 Main Street	P.O. Box 7532
Boise, Idaho 83702	Boise, Idaho 83707

# INTRODUCTION

## The Spirit of Cooperation

Reconstructing a picture of prehistory requires the careful excavation of many sites. Through archaeology, the past, its people and their environment are revealed. Each site opens a window into a small part of the life of people who left no written record. Each artifact is analyzed and compared with those from other sites to help us understand the everyday activities of life hundreds or thousands of years ago.

Although archaeologists have been able to piece together part of the picture of prehistoric life, much remains to be done. Many of the sites which could have contributed to our knowledge have been destroyed by illegal digging and collecting. The ones that remain should be protected and preserved to assure a lasting legacy.



Our story of the past is made possible through the cooperation of professional archaeologists in federal and state agencies and in universities, tribal officers in local Native American groups, trained people from local amateur archaeological societies and concerned citizens. Each of these participants share such activities as law enforcement to protect the sites, funding and management to assure proper excavation, the proper care and storage of artifacts and the labor to assure that the understanding of

prehistory can be brought to the public.

Working together, these groups build and share Idaho's past, part of the National heritage of the People of the United States.

Archaeological research in the area has shown that human populations utilized the northeastern Snake River plain on a seasonal basis for more than 12,000 years. In fact, some of the earliest evidence of human occupation in North America is found in the region. The cultural chronology of the eastern Snake River plain is based on changes in weapons systems and projectile point styles. Nomadic hunter-gatherers pursued now-extinct Pleistocene mammoth, camel and horse and modern game animals such as deer, antelope and bison.

# PORTNEUF VALLEY

## Archaeology and the Greenbelt Project

Prehistoric sites are found all along the Portneuf River, from its confluence with the Snake River upstream to its headwaters. The locations of modern towns and farms closely parallel the locations of prehistoric activities. While the construction of modern structures has destroyed some evidence of human prehistory, much remains to be protected.

Conservation of the natural and cultural resources has become a priority for residents of the Pocatello area. A National Park Service Planning Grant has allowed design of Pocatello's "Greenbelt Project," a zone of reconstructed and protected river environment. Hiking, bicycling, canoeing, picnics and play will be promoted in a natural environment that holds a wealth of archaeological resources.

Members of the Great Rift Chapter of the Idaho Archaeological Society have begun surveys of the prehistoric rock art sites that run along the Portneuf and its tributaries. Kraft Hill in Pocatello and an area from Ross Park on the south end of town to Indian Rocks north of McCammon are a priority for these dedicated amateur archaeologists.

Idaho State University and the Idaho Museum of Natural History are operating an archaeological field school to locate, describe and promote the preservation of these archaeological sites. Professional archaeologists from the Bureau of Land Management and students work with volunteer members of the Idaho Archaeological Society, the Boy Scouts

of America and Shoshone-Bannock tribal elders. The complete recording will take a number of years and continue to be a focus of work as the Pocatello Greenbelt Project matures.

The Greenbelt Project is an excellent example of public involvement in archaeology with its emphasis on grassroots concern for the local environment and natural and cultural resources. Idaho's archaeological resources are a common heritage for all to fully appreciate.



## BOBCAT CAVE

### Ice Storage in the Middle Prehistoric

Bobcat Cave was discovered by an amateur cave explorer (*spelunker*) who brought it to the attention of the Idaho Falls District Bureau of Land Management archaeologist.

Two separate lava tubes form the upper and lower chambers of the cave and are connected by a very narrow tunnel. A rubble filled depression begins the steep entrance to the cave. Air temperature in the lower level stays a constant 34 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and fall.

In 1987 and 1989 the Bureau of Land Management and Idaho State University sponsored an archaeological field school at the site. One hundred and sixty-six antler tines and ninety-five stone tools, mostly pestles, were found clustered on basalt boulders in the lower chamber. These were found on top of a layer of loose ash and bark. Below this a layer of scattered sagebrush stalks rested on clear ice. Radiocarbon samples indicate that people used the cave about 4,200 years ago.

What was this site used for? The question remains unanswered. Antler tines with pestle fragments as hammers may have been used to chip ice for drinking water. Modern bison bone fragments found during the excavation may indicate that the cave was used to store meat between the ice and the sagebrush, ash and bark layers. The ash and bark may have served to disguise the smell of the meat from carnivores and rodents or as insulation.

# BIRCH CREEK

## Rockshelters in the Middle and Late Prehistoric

Bison and Veratic Rockshelters were formed when Ice Age (*Pleistocene*) Birch Creek flowed against the foot of limestone cliffs. Floods from Birch Creek deposited water-rounded cobbles and soil in the earliest layers. Overlaying this is coarse gravel that contains layers of ash from two western volcanoes.

The Glacier Peak eruption occurred about 11,500 years ago and Mount Mazama erupted about 6,700 years ago covering most of the Northwest. These bands of ash give archaeologists a reference point in time for dating levels in the site. Above the ash are alternating deposits of coarse sand, gravel and silt.

Bison and Veratic rockshelters were used by people over the last 10,000 years for convenient hunting camps.

Groups using Northern Side-notched points camped at the shelters 5,600 years ago. They made several large fires, attached new points to their atlatl darts and left behind several dozen broken points. After the hunters had killed large game animals they carried the meat to the shelter to be cooked, eaten or preserved.

About 4,000 years ago people who hunted with Elko projectile points again butchered and ate bison meat around campfires at these shelters.

Archaeological research in the Birch Creek Valley began in 1959 by Earl H. Swanson at the Bison

and Veratic Rockshelters. In the summer of 1990 Idaho State University, Idaho Museum of Natural History, Bureau of Land Management, Idaho Falls District and U.S. Forest Service, Targhee Ranger District cooperated in sponsoring a field school at the Jimmy Olsen Rockshelter near the earlier excavations. The students were joined by volunteers, including members of the Great Rift Chapter of the Idaho Archaeological Society.

Excavations of 1990 were conducted to determine the extent of damage by vandals who destroyed almost 4,000 years of human history. This loss can never be replaced, but the remaining materials contributed to our understanding of prehistoric people in the Birch Creek Valley.

# WAHMUZA

## Shoshone-Bannock Prehistory

Wah'-muza, which in Shoshone means Cedar Point, is a large archaeological site on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Dr. Richard Holmer, now Director of the Idaho Museum of Natural History at the Idaho State University, with the cooperation of the Shoshone-Bannock tribe, conducted an archaeological field school at the site in the summers of 1985 and 1986. The site presented a unique opportunity to learn about the early Shoshone-Bannock people through the archeological record.

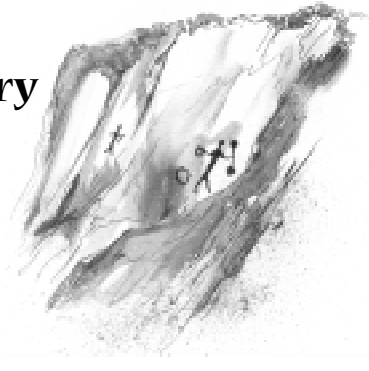
Excavation revealed three house floors, a large hill of debris or midden and numerous fire hearths. These features represented four different periods of occupation and contain evidence of

Shoshone activity covering the past two thousand years.

Several camp areas and fire hearths represented the most recent Shoshone use of the site. One fire hearth was radiocarbon dated at AD 1850. Artifacts included stone tools, over one thousand pottery fragments, and trade items like musketballs, cartridges, glass, horse harness and military buttons and epaulets.

Dwellings were constructed by the Shoshone at the site in AD 1450 and AD 700. These two earlier periods of use were undoubtedly Shoshone as determined by the pottery and projectile point styles.

The earliest occupation is marked by the occurrence of Pinto type stone projectile points, known to archaeologists



to be three thousand years old. It is not certain that this represents Shoshone culture.

Excavations at Wahmuza, and later at Dagger Falls on the Salmon River, are starting to unravel Shoshone prehistory. Archaeologists are only now beginning to feel confident about the identification of artifacts as Shoshone. The Shoshone-Bannock tribes at Fort Hall value the archaeological work for revealing information about their past, and for its importance in establishing Shoshone treaty rights.

# AVIATOR'S CAVE

## A Microscopic Look at Late Prehistoric Life

Aviator's Cave is a collapsed lava tube on Idaho National Engineering Laboratory land. Undisturbed in the cave were bits and pieces of everyday items used by people who lived 300-700 years ago.

Prehistoric families of men, women and children visited the cave on at least two separate occasions. People probably ducked into the cave in bad weather to take advantage of its protective overhang. They entered from a basin of collapsed basalt rubble. In the fall the visitors laid down a scattered mat of sagebrush bark at the foot of the rock pile. Later, another group constructed a circular arrangement of boulders around a thick grass mat.

People were in the cave probably no more than a few days at a time. They repaired arrows, stripped fiber and fixed nets, cut and sewed skin clothing and made and used small animal snares and traps. Meals were cooked over an open fire. Children played with toys in various parts of the cave.

Samples of bark and grass mats recovered from the site have been sorted and analyzed.

Microscopes are routinely used to look at very small fragments to uncover these clues of the past.

If not for the cooperation of the helicopter pilots who found the cave while flying, the Department of Energy and Idaho State University, this unique insight into the everyday life of people would not have been possible.



# WASDEN SITE

## Early Big Game Hunting

Eighteen miles west of Idaho Falls on the Snake River Plain is the Wasden site. Owl Cave is one of the three collapsed lava blisters at this location. It was found by Helen and Richard Gildersleeve, members of the Upper Snake River Prehistoric Society, Inc. This group of amateur archaeologists was advised by Idaho State University archaeologist B. Robert Butler. He supervised excavations until 1971, when Susanne Miller, an ISU student and member of the Upper Snake River Society, took over the role of primary investigator.

Owl Cave is a natural trap for snow and wind blown soils. It was selected for excavation

because of the probability of stratified cultural deposits. Finely stratified geological sediments were discovered, extending back some 11,000 years. These layers held abundant small animal bones. Undigested remains of northern pocket gopher, pygmy rabbit and Townsend ground squirrel were the most common left by the many generations of owls that roosted in the cave.

Human use of Owl Cave first began 10,600 years ago. Three fluted stone projectile points, small stone flakes and other stone flakes were found with the bones of *Mammuthus columbi*, a now extinct member of the elephant family.

Eight thousand years ago, early hunters stampeded *Bison antiquus* into the cave. They left behind their tools with the remains of more than seventy individual bison. Animals were killed by spear thrusts into the body cavities and then butchered. Minute fragments of bone knives were seen in cuts on the bone but no butchering tools were found with the skeletons. A single nasal bone flesher and about thirty lanceolate projectile points were recovered from the kills.

Without the assistance of concerned amateurs, the Wasden site may have fallen prey to vandals and a significant part of Idaho's prehistory lost.