

October 7, 2009

SJBAS Range Creek Trip Report, 09/18/09 through 09/21/09

September 18 through September 21, 2009, 16 members made a memorable trip to Range Creek Canyon southeast of Price Utah, west of the Tavaputs Plateau and the Green River to tour the Range Creek valley Fremont communities dating from about A.D. 500 to A.D. 1350, stunning rock art and nearly invisible granaries camouflaged high in the cliffs. We went on an all day tour given by Tavaputs Ranch, run by Jeanie Jensen, niece of Waldo Wilcox, the rancher who protected these treasures behind locked gates for decades, and her husband Butch Jensen. We were also guided by Mark Connolly, Officer in charge of Range Creek with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. We quickly learned that the rock art, granaries, dwellings and pithouses were so well hidden in this deep valley with canyon walls towering nearly 3,000 feet overhead in places, that we never would have seen many of them without our guides. The Jensens, who both grew up in the valley, used spotting scopes and color photographs to help us focus on the splendid rock art, ruins and granaries high on the walls above us. We visited pithouse communities and saw wooden platforms cantilevered out from the canyon walls and used as a base to build granaries. We visited the Wilcox Ranch which is the headquarters for the field schools run by Dr. Duncan Metcalfe, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Curator of Archaeology, Utah Museum of Natural History, and Site Manager Corrine Springer. Both of them were working at the ranch and over lunch told us of their field school work and recent discoveries and theories. We visited the valley where Officer Connolly recovered a Fremont flute from a cave high above the valley floor. He told us of his exciting experiences climbing to the very difficult to access cave and the crack where the flute was found, and of the moving ceremonies performed by a Northern Ute elder to appease the spirit of the flute on the day it was removed for curation. This well-preserved flute is the only one of its kind found in Fremont sites. In addition to learning about the ancient artifacts, rock art, granaries and communities of the Fremont, we learned about the history of the settlers in the valley and the hardships they faced ranching and farming in this remote valley. As we returned to our campsites, we were sad to see this special day in Range Creek come to an end.

The day after our tour of Range Creek we were privileged to be allowed to use the private 4WD drive road built by the Jensens to access their ranch high above Range Creek on the Tavaputs Plateau overlooking Desolation Canyon and the Green River. Tavaputs Ranch accepts guests and we were treated to a tour of their beautiful home and lodge. They showed us the roads to cross the ranches on the Tavaputs Plateau and to access the upper part of Nine Mile Canyon via the beautiful Dry Canyon. This allowed us to see fine rock art panels in Dry Canyon and to arrive in the far end of Nine Mile Canyon in time to see many large rock art panels concentrated around Daddy Canyon and in Cottonwood Canyon. We camped at Nine Mile Ranch and the next day drove to Price Utah to tour the excellent College of Eastern Utah Museum which has both a fine archaeology wing and a fine paleontology wing. We were fortunate enough to meet with Dr. Renee Barlow, Curator of Archaeology for the museum, who is conducting excavations and studies of the numerous pithouse communities in the valley. She explained that pithouse

communities covered nearly every hilltop throughout the entire valley. An interesting discovery she made was very thick, heavy roofs on the pithouses which she must slowly and carefully work through to reach the floors underneath. It appears that the valley was heavily inhabited during the years of drought throughout the southwest because it had dependable year-round water sources and probably received more moisture than surrounding areas. Fields were scattered throughout the valley and she believes each farmer had 7 to 10 plots of corn and probably moved around the valley tending them. This was enough to dependably produce the corn crops the Fremont relied upon and explains the inaccessibility of their granaries to desperate outsiders who might wish to raid them. When droughts lifted in the Southwest, occupation in Range Creek declined. In the museum we saw the Pilling figurines, a remarkable collection of highly detailed male and female unfired clay figures, some of which still bear traces of bright paint. They were found together in a cave in the Range Creek area. We also saw a replica and photos of the flute as well as the cave and crack in which it was found. Our visit to the museum concluded this exciting trip and left us with a desire to learn more and to return to this very special place.

Soon after our visit, control of Range Creek was transferred from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources to the Utah School Lands. The University of Utah will lease the lands from Utah School Lands. This may change visitation opportunities to Range Creek but we learned that Tavaputs Ranch will still be conducting tours to the canyon. We also learned of the possibility of workshops and volunteer opportunities as the University of Utah develops future programs.

R. Gail Schulz, Trip Leader