

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **October 26 - 28, 2018**

Destination: **Vernal Rock Art**

Leader: **Tish Varney**

Number of Participants: **13**

Our SJBAS group traveled on trek (about 7 hours) to Vernal Utah for a long weekend of exploration and wonderment. Our headquarters at downtown Dinosaur Inn afforded us a convenient location for museums, restaurants and beginning our daily adventures! Most of the 13 participants stayed there and enjoyed comfortable rooms and a hearty breakfast. (I recommend it.)

October 26: This was a day full of varied activities. At the Utah Field House of Natural History built in 2004, we met Mary Beth Bennis-Bottomley., the Education Curator and Dale Grey, volunteer coordinator for fossil preparations. Our first stop was in the prep. area where Dale gave us a thorough review of the challenges involving fossil stabilization and exposure of mostly boney remains. Dinosaur fossils from the Cleveland Lloyd Quarry are a weight challenge, for sure, so just moving them into the prep area requires large doors, pulleys and rolling tables. Some fossil matrixes are mud and create a difficult environment to extract from the plaster molds. Dale demonstrated the various materials and tools of the trade.



Marybeth completed our tour by leading us through the museum exhibits where she pointed out the geological relationships involving fossil remains.

After lunch, Tim Sweeney, our local rock art guide, took us out to McConkie Ranch located along Dry Fork Creek. This private ranch allows folks to explore the incredible petroglyphs (pecking) and pictographs (painting) located on the sandstone cliffs above the valley. One of the most spectacular panels in the area is the Three Kings Panel. Tim pointed out that there are different styles of rock art that help guide us in the relative age of these petroglyphs. The majority of rock art in this area appears to have been created during the

Uinta Fremont culture period. The most common style is called Classic Vernal Style dating approximately the same time as the Puebloans AD 1 to about 1300. Later styles AD 1300-1600 are called Late Prehistoric (Ute).

From McConkie Ranch, our group met up with Ashley Nation Forest Archaeologist, Jeff Rust, at the Uintah County Heritage Museum. Jeff took us to view the Leo C. Thorne First People Collection of mostly perishable artifacts and talk about the lifestyle of these early Fremont peoples. These artifacts survived, some intact, in caves and shelters out of the elements. These objects included burden baskets, snares, drinking cups, net bags and herb bundles.



October 27: Both guides, Tim and Darlene Sweeney, met us for a full day of field trips. Ashley Creek is one of the richest and most incredible rock art locations! Here, along the creek valley are many panels that suggest maps, astronomical events, territory markers, shaman visions or commemorative events. Above the valley, many more panels are visible along the cliff face. Strangely, Vernal residents also consider the cliff an excellent place to throw their unwanted trash such as bed frames, mattresses, tires, lawn chairs, etc. – a veritable modern-day midden!

The last site of the day was called 'Lapoint'- an alcove with pictographs. Apparently, this panel is 'refreshed' periodically by the Utes as the handprints look remarkable vibrant. The Sweeneys, now on a roll, were ready to show us more sites on into the twilight; however, we respectfully declined as the Vernal Brewery reservation was calling!

October 28: At the stroke of 9am, our caravan headed east to spend the day. The geology of the area includes descriptions and names like Split Mountain and Rainbow Park and Gates of Ladore along the course of the Green River. One stop we were treated to both rock art panels **and** concretions, those natural bowling balls that pop out of the cliffs. Concretions form as minerals within a rock aggregate and begin to precipitate within cracks and cavities, or as a sediment builds up in successive layers around a nucleus such as a shell or pebble. Here the McKee Springs site has some fine panels.

The hike into the valley by Rainbow Park was magical! Rainbow Park is along the Green River and is a takeout and launch point for raft trips as well as a great lunch spot. Areas with layered colorful sections, like a rainbow, as well as tortured rock outcrops give the park its name. The more intrepid climbers ascended to a ledge to discover petroglyph images on a horizontal surface as well.

Our final stop and hike for the day took us by an outcrop of belemnite fossils. **Belemnite** is the common name applied to an extinct order (Belemnoida) of mollusks belonging to the cephalopod class. Modern cephalopods include the squid. These fossil remains look like bullets. However, the really amazing destination revealed a petroglyph calendar(!) The center of the



calendar contained a hole which accommodated an object like a stick. We were happy to find one that fit inside to give the hypothesis of a sundial or pointer for the seasons. The group was certainly buzzing with thoughts about this image! Reluctantly, we said 'goodbye' to the Sweeneys but not before inquiring about another field trip next year...

Prepared by: Tish Varney

Participants: Joan and Byron Kellogg, Betsy Moore and Phil Bruckbauer, Jill and Bill Tripp, Marion and Andy Simon, Barron (Bear) Haley, Chris Kilgore, Darwin Thompson, and Tish and Pete Varney