

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **June, 2018**

Destination: **Yellow Jacket Pueblo**

Leaders: **Janice Sheftel**

Number of Participants: **14**

Despite huge winds, fourteen SJBAS members followed guide Jerry Fetterman, Woods Canyon Archaeological Consultants, on a two-mile tour to view the portion of the 140-acre Yellow Jacket Pueblo ruin owned by the Archaeological Conservancy, based in Albuquerque. The remainder of the site, including a great kiva, is in private hands.

The site is situated in the upland area between the two arms at the head of Yellow Jacket Canyon northwest of Cortez. Looking at the site from the parking area, it is overgrown with sagebrush. Without being immediately apparent, there are 42 room blocks with possibly 1,500 rooms, 192-195 kivas, 27 towers, a Great Tower, a possible great house, a possible Great Kiva and a possible reservoir. The possible great house and great kiva on the north end of the site, are outside the reserve boundaries and can be viewed only from a distance. It is thought that Chaco Canyon-influenced people appeared here around 1,080 AD. The elevation is about 6,800 feet. Besides great archaeology, there are also sweeping views of Yellow Jacket Canyon and Sleeping Ute Mountain.

Yellow Jacket Pueblo, the largest known Ancestral Puebloan village in the Mesa Verde region, may have been the center of a larger community that included an unknown number of smaller sites near the main village. A substantial amount of research has been conducted in the Yellow Jacket community. In 1931, there was a field school from the Museum of Western State College in Gunnison. For many years, Joe Ben Wheat supervised field school excavations at the small sites southwest of Yellow Jacket Pueblo for the University of Colorado Museum.

The Yellow Jacket site still hasn't been fully excavated. In 1930, according to the Conservancy, the Great House was damaged when building stones were put through a rock crusher to make gravel for the highway being built between Cortez and Dove Creek.

With permission from various landowners, archaeologists from Crow Canyon surveyed the entire Pueblo and conducted extensive mapping. They conducted test excavations at Yellow Jacket from 1995 through 1997, principally on the portions owned by the Conservancy and on one privately owned site. Crow Canyon re-excavated several of the structures initially excavated by Western State. The data from those excavations indicate that the village was occupied by perhaps 1,500 people from 1160 through the late A.D. 1200's, possibly by Chacoan people, the dates corresponding to the late Pueblo II through Pueblo III periods.

Research on possible archaeoastronomy alignments at sites within the Yellow Jacket community was conducted by Kim Malville (1991), who also briefly discussed a monolith at the southeast corner of Architectural Block 2600 and an "ash cave" below the south canyon rim. Several exact alignments at Yellow Jacket are similar to the alignments found at

Chaco Canyon. Near a petroglyph site there is a very large rubble pile structure. On one side there is a standing monument that is thought to have a summer solstice alignment with the Lizard Head formation and other peaks in the San Miguel Mountains about 50 miles away that are sometimes visible. Two similar monuments have fallen over. An interesting feature is a five-foot monolith believed to be a solstice marker that projected shadows across a wall that is no longer standing. Four similar-sized monoliths that are no longer standing have been found.

The highlight of the site, the Great Tower Complex, is on the northeast side of the pueblo. The large tower-kiva is 23 feet across and is part of castle-like compact structure that may have been located to protect the spring water source for the area. The Great Tower Complex has been partially excavated several times but has been back-filled, so no standing walls are visible. This complex appears to have been built relatively late in the history of Yellow Jacket, around 1240-1280 AD.

Some surface water is visible below the cattails in Yellow Jacket Canyon and rubble is visible near the springs. In addition to the springs as a water supply, there are the remains of check dams along the drainages to catch surface runoff. Further down the Canyon, there are rubble piles below the rim. The structures protecting the water source are thought to be part of a trend in the mid-thirteenth century as rising population put more demand on the resources.

No large structures are still standing at the site, but the ground is littered with potsherds, rock artifacts, tool-making scatter and partial walls. There may be several shrine structures along the east side of the site near the canyon rim, semi-circular, east facing sites where offerings to the spirits or forces of nature were made.

The Archaeological Conservancy owns 500 archaeological preserves in 46 states, many of which are in Colorado. Over the past 32 years, the Conservancy has slowly acquired 140 acres of the Yellow Jacket Pueblo complex.

For more information about this interesting site, see Kuchelman, Kristin A., "The Archaeology of Yellow Jacket Canyon: Excavation at a large community center in southwestern Colorado," which is based on data contained in Crow Canyon's "The Yellow Jacket Pueblo Database," which contains detailed descriptions and interpretations of individual study units, including information on features, point-located artifacts, masonry styles, stratigraphy, building construction, and structure dating. The database also contains more than 70 AutoCAD maps and 800 color photographs.

- By Janice Sheftel