



Walker Lake Archaeological Survey



NPS Archaeologists record a site near Walker Lake. Jillian Richie maps the boundary of the site while Joe Keeney documents and photographs each artifact.

NPS photo by Chris Cancelli

Located at the headwaters of the Kobuk River in Gates of the Arctic National Park, Walker Lake was the focus for a National Park Service archaeological survey in July 2013. A crew of four archaeologists evaluated the condition of known prehistoric sites, expanded survey coverage, and identified new archaeological sites. Past surveys in the area documented small lithic scatters indicative of short-term prehistoric hunting locations; results of the 2013 survey follow this tendency.

Discoveries of Ancient Sites Continue

Fourteen known archaeological sites were revisited during the 2013 field season, and 16 new sites were discovered. The majority of investigated sites are lithic scatters—remains of chert, obsidian, and other stone material discarded during ancient tool production. A typical site contains one or more lithic scatters, small in both number of artifacts and extent, and is usually located on one of the many elevated landforms near the lake (e.g. bedrock knolls, beach ridges, and glacial moraines). A small number of tools are present in some

scatters, and include unifacial scrapers, expedient flake tools, microblades, biface preforms and side-notched projectile points. Test pits dug near lithic scatters have also revealed prehistoric campfires, or hearths. Hearths are particularly interesting to archaeologists for their ability to preserve organic material like charcoal or bone, which can indicate when the fire last burned using radiocarbon dating. Samples of bone and charcoal collected from hearths at Walker Lake during the 2013 field season date as old as 4,320 years ago.

These arctic hunter-gatherers used stone tools to hunt and process a kill, typically caribou, and the elevated landforms on which the tools were discovered at Walker Lake were likely used as lookouts.



NPS photo by Jillian Richie

A side-notched point discovered in 2013 during the archaeological survey at Walker Lake. The notches near the base allow the point to be securely fastened to a shaft.



NPS photo by Jillian Richie

One of two sub-surface hearths found at Walker Lake in 2013, evidenced by oxidized soil, bone fragments, and flecks of charcoal.

Early Hunter-Gatherers at Walker Lake

Information gained during the 2013 field season is preliminary in nature, but the archaeological sites dated in 2013 are most likely associated with the Northern Archaic tradition, a cultural and technological tradition associated with hunter-gatherers across Alaska and northwest Canada. These arctic hunter-gatherers used stone tools to hunt and process

a kill, typically caribou, and the elevated landforms on which the tools were discovered at Walker Lake were likely used as lookouts. Additionally, the ephemeral nature of sites at Walker Lake, along with artifact assemblages that include end scrapers and bone fragments, appears to reflect temporary hunting localities.

Cultural Resources at Risk

Cultural materials at Walker Lake are at a risk of being disturbed by human collection, animal trampling, and other natural forces such as fire and erosion. Despite this risk, the vast majority of sites evaluated in 2013 are stable and in good condition, with only minimal impacts by human or natural disturbances.

Anyone can help maintain these, and other, archaeological sites by leaving archaeological materials in their natural setting. If you encounter a site or artifact, report it to National Park Service staff with photographs and detailed location information.

For more information on Gates of the Arctic's archaeological survey at Walker Lake, please contact Jillian Richie at (907) 455-0630, or email her at Jillian_D_Richie@nps.gov.

Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve

