

Archeology Program

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The Montana-Yellowstone Archeological Project: 2007 Field Season

Introduction

During the summer of 2007, the Montana Yellowstone Archeological Project (MYAP) field school carried out survey and excavation in the 700 acre Boundary Lands parcel of Yellowstone NP. The survey area is located north of the North Entrance Arch in Gardiner, Montana. Located along the Yellowstone River, the project area had a high potential for prehistoric and historic archeological sites. Research goals included the identification of stratified prehistoric occupations along the river, as well as the relocation of the former Northern Pacific railroad station of Cinnabar, occupied between 1883 and 1903.



Yellowstone River survey area. (NPS photo)

In order to achieve project goals, the MYAP field team conducted archeological survey and in-depth excavations. This collaborative project provided field training for 11 University of Montana students in cultural resource management, survey, and excavation. Through this training, archeological resources in the park that were previously unrecorded were described and documented. The field work that was carried out relieves park archeologists of the task of conducting surveys in the same area in order to identify archeological resources. The benefits to both parties from this collaborative process were not possible without cooperation and coordination.

Background to the Project

The Montana Yellowstone Archeological Project (MYAP) is a collaborative archeological and cultural resource management project between the University of Montana (UM) and Yellowstone National Park (YNP). The 2007 field school was funded largely by the Rocky Mountain Cooperative Ecosystem Study Unit (CESU) with supplemental funds from the University of Montana. The Principal Investigator was Doug MacDonald (University of Montana Anthropology Department Assistant Professor). Elaine Hale and Ann Johnson, Yellowstone National Park Archeologists, provided technical support. Fieldwork was directed by Brenda Covington (University of Montana Graduate Student).

In addition, Yellowstone National Park supported the project through provision of laboratory space at the Heritage Research Center. The Heritage Research Center houses an extensive research library, a curation facility, archeological laboratories, and research facilities for numerous park cultural resource personnel and historians. The research center provided the field crew with background research materials, and laboratory space for artifact processing and team meetings and lectures.

Survey Results

The MYAP team identified and recorded 14 archeological sites during survey of the Boundary Lands, including 8 with evidence of historic period occupation and 11 with evidence of prehistoric use. Of the 14 sites, initial data indicate that as many as 9 may be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The team also identified and recorded a number of historic sites, including a dairy dating to and the former Northern Pacific Railroad corridor. In addition, the MYAP team located the site of the Cinnabar train station (1883-1903) and other historic era deposits, after Yellowstone NP Archeologist Ann Johnson pointed the MYAP crew to several depressions along the Old Yellowstone Road. Cinnabar was the official Northern Pacific train stop for Yellowstone National Park tourists between 1883 and 1903. After 1903, the Northern Pacific extended the rail line to Gardiner—3 miles southeast—near the north park entrance stone arch. At this time, Cinnabar was largely abandoned.

Test Excavations at Cinnabar

MYAP archeologists focused their test excavations on an apparent line of rocks along one of the depressions noted by Johnson. This line of river cobbles turned into a 5-ft.-deep mortared river cobble foundation, presumably to the Cinnabar Hotel (which hosted President Theodore Roosevelt and General George Sheridan, among others). The MYAP archeological team also excavated the corner of the foundation, as well as the entry way to another building further south. Artifacts pulled from the Cinnabar excavations included a Northern Pacific rail sign, revolver bullets, newspaper fragments, and the sole to a cowboy boot.

Test Excavations at Native American sites

The MYAP team salvaged five prehistoric fire pits that were eroding out of the banks of the Yellowstone River, downstream of Cinnabar. The remains likely were used by the 2000-year-old Pelican Lake culture, a fairly active period of occupation in Yellowstone NP.

Plans for Next Season

Analysis of historic and stone artifacts are ongoing at the University of Montana. Graduate student Lester Maas, is helping to complete the CRM report as a professional project toward his degree. David Dick is completing an historic artifact analysis, and plans to use the data as part of a graduate thesis regarding the historic archeology of the Boundary Lands portion of Yellowstone NP. Ultimately, the 2007 MYAP season was successful in meeting student learning opportunities, while addressing cultural resource management needs of Yellowstone NP. A second season of fieldwork is already planned for the summer of 2008.



Projectile point found during salvage operation.
(NPS photo)

Douglas McDonald, University of Montana

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