

Effigy Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Monument
Iowa



Illustration NPS/Michael Hampshire

With basketloads of fill material, the Effigy Mounds people in northeastern Iowa created a variety of animal shapes three to four feet high and up to 212 feet long.

Taking what nature provided, Effigy Mounds people fashioned tools and ornaments such as this awl (left) from a bird bone and a pendant (near left) from a bear's tooth.

Bears and Birds Made of Earth

At first you see low rises on the landscape. Soon your eye begins to pick out regular patterns in the hills. If you trace the patterns, the "hills" turn into familiar shapes—animals rising in low relief from out of the ground. These effigies are not the work of nature but were created between 750 and 1,400 years ago by American Indians. While American Indians built mounds at various times and places throughout the Americas, only in the upper Midwest was there a culture that regularly built mounds that seem to be in the shapes of birds, turtles, lizards, bison, and most commonly bears.

Why were effigy mounds created? Since the mounds are best viewed from above, who or what was meant to see them? With no written records and few surviving tribal stories and traditions, the origin and meaning of the effigy mounds remain a mystery.

While effigy mounds have always attracted the most attention, they are not the oldest mounds in this area, nor were their builders the first inhabitants. Human occupation in eastern Iowa dates back almost 12,000 years. Dome-shaped conical mounds were built beginning about 3,000 years ago by people now known as the Woodland Indians.

By 1,600 years ago, during the Late Woodland period, the local Indian people began to build effigy mounds in the area from just

west of the Upper Mississippi River to the western bank of Lake Michigan. Locally, this hunter-gatherer culture thrived on the rich resources along the Mississippi's waters, wetlands, and forests. From summer camps along the river they caught fish and gathered freshwater mussels, arrowhead roots, wild rice, acorns, fruits, and berries. White-tailed deer and elk were the staple foods in winter, when extended family groups utilized rock shelters in protected valleys.

Earthen effigy mounds began to appear around 1,400 years ago. They may have been religious sites or clan symbols that were used in seasonal ceremonies. Some effigy mounds contain evidence of fire—probably ceremonial—in the "head," "heart," or "flank" of the mound. According to some tribal stories, the bear is the guardian of the Earth and the spirit bird the guardian of the sky. Perhaps the mounds were a means of connecting the people to the land, their spirit world, and their ancestors.

Around 750 years ago, the building of effigy mounds ceased. Archeological evidence suggests a major cultural transition at that time: people of the region began living in larger permanent villages, making new forms of pottery, and most significantly depending far more on agriculture rather than on hunting and gathering. The prehistoric people that took up this new way of life are today known as the Oneota.

They are believed to be the ancestors of historic tribes in the effigy mounds region.

European explorers began arriving in the late 1600s. The fur trade between the Indians, French, British, and eventually Americans continued into the mid-19th century. Large numbers of American settlers began moving into the region in the 1840s. The land on which the mounds stood was logged, plowed, and converted into farmland. Some 19th-century views held that the mounds were built by technologically advanced cultures from the Middle East, China, or Europe. Research conducted by the Smithsonian Institution in the 1880s provided conclusive evidence that the moundbuilders were prehistoric American Indians.

Surveys of northeastern Iowa in the 19th and early 20th centuries documented more than 10,000 mounds of all types. A hundred years later, fewer than 1,000 survived. Efforts arose to preserve some of the remaining mounds. On October 25, 1949, Effigy Mounds National Monument was established. Today, as you walk along the bluffs and around the mounds, be respectful of the ancient people whose relationship with nature inspired these creations.

The heart of the Effigy Mounds world lay in what is now southern Wisconsin and parts of adjacent states. Surviving effigies are found mostly along waterways.



Tools and Trade

Stone was abraded to make a celt (below) and a hammerhead (right). Chert was fashioned into spear-points and arrowheads of various styles (lower center and right). Clay from the riverbank was used for pottery

(far right). Exotic materials were obtained in trade, as demonstrated by the breastplate (upper right) made from copper mined on Michigan's Upper Peninsula.



Artifact photographs—National Park Service

A Guide to the Mounds

Within Effigy Mounds National Monument are 206 known prehistoric mounds. Thirty-one take the form of animal effigies, and the remainder are conical, compound, or linear, as shown in the bird's-eye diagrams below. The Little Bear effigy mound near Fire Point is shown at right.



Illustrations NPS/Michael Hampshire

The oldest and most numerous mounds in the area, dating back about 3,000 years, are cone-shaped. The conical mounds (above left) are round domes of earth, two to ten feet high and 10 to 20 feet in diameter.

Similar mounds can be found throughout the eastern half of the United States, especially in

the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. Ancient peoples in this region buried their dead in conical mounds, the oldest of which contain traces of red ocher (iron oxide) used in burials.

Linear mounds (second from left) were built between 1,700 and 1,300 years ago. They were two to four feet high, six to eight feet across,

and could reach 100 feet in length.

Compound mounds (second from right) are conical mounds joined by linear mounds. They may have marked a transition phase from the conical to the linear styles. Groups of these mounds generally contain three or four linked conical mounds. The largest group in this

park has seven conicals and extends 480 feet.

Both linear and compound mounds are found only in the Effigy Mounds region. Like the effigy mounds, they were probably built for ceremonial purposes rather than for burials.

This part of the upper Mississippi is famous for its effigy mounds.

The Effigy Mounds culture lived only in northeastern Iowa, southern Wisconsin, northern Illinois, and southeastern Minnesota (see map above artifacts). They created many different shapes, but in this area birds and bears (right) predominate.

A typical effigy is two to four feet high, 40 feet wide, and 80 feet

long. Wingspans of 124 and 212 feet are found on two bird mounds in the park. The Great Bear mound is 137 feet long and 70 feet wide at the shoulder.

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Exploring Effigy Mounds



Dutchman's Breeches
Kent and Donna Dannen



Bald Eagle
National Park Service



Red Columbine
Kent and Donna Dannen



Wild Turkey
Kent and Donna Dannen



Wild Sweet William
National Park Service

Planning Your Visit

Effigy Mounds National Monument is located three miles north of Marquette on Iowa 76.

Stop first at the visitor center, open daily except for certain public holidays. For hours and days of operation, call the park or check the website.

Picnic tables are not provided in the park. There are picnic areas along Iowa 76 south of the visitor center. Motels and restaurants can be found in nearby towns.

Besides unusual archeological attractions, Effigy Mounds has plants and animals that make up a biological community typical of the upper Mississippi River valley. The main section of the park is divided into two units separated by the Yellow River. Both units are best explored by trails.

North Unit A two-mile walk on the Fire Point Trail goes past Little

Bear Mound (outlined with pebbles), conical and compound mounds, and river views. Ranger-conducted programs are offered from early June through Labor Day. A longer self-guiding walk follows the Hanging Rock Trail, passing the Great Bear Mound, tallgrass prairie, and river overlooks. During the school year, educational tours may be arranged in advance.

South Unit The trail system in the south unit leads through hardwood forest and restored tallgrass prairie (see map below). Destinations include Marching Bear Group (10 bear and three bird mounds), Compound Mound Group, Yellow River Mound Group, Founders Pond Overlook, and Nezekaw Point Overlook. There is a parking lot 0.5 mile south of the visitor center at the day-use area.

For a Safe Visit All archeological and natural objects in the park are protected by law. Vandalism, looting, digging, and altering the mounds or features are prohibited. • Use or possession of firearms is prohibited. • Watch for poison ivy, mosquitoes, and deer ticks. • Pets must be restrained by leash at all times. • Stay on trails. • The visitor center, museum, audio-visual program, and public restrooms are wheelchair accessible.

Related sites Other Woodlands-era mound sites are Fish Farm Mounds, north of Lansing, Iowa; Pikes Peak State Park in Iowa; and Wyalusing State Park in Wisc. There are also mound sites open to the public in St. Paul, Minn., and throughout southern Wisconsin.

More information
Effigy Mounds National Monument
151 Highway 76
Harpers Ferry, IA 52146-7519
563-873-3491
www.nps.gov/efmo



Marching Bear Group
National Park Service



View from Hanging Rock
A trail (3.5 miles one way) from the visitor center takes you to the Hanging Rock overlook, part of a large limestone outcropping. On your

way you will pass several mound groups. As you walk the trails, watch carefully for white-tailed deer, a common resident in the area.



Third Scenic View
Northward is a good view of Hanging Rock as well as the islands that make up the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

The park grounds are forested with mixed deciduous trees—oak, maple, walnut, shagbark hickory, birch, and aspen.



View from Fire Point
One of the mysterious features of the Fire Point mound is burned clay. Found in the top layer of the mound, this clay was carried up from the banks of the Mississippi River.

The expansive view from here includes Pikes Peak State Park, far to the south, and Prairie du Chien across the river in Wisconsin.



View from Eagle Rock
To the south are Bluegill Pond, Buffalo Pond, and, on the far side of the Yellow River marshlands, the south unit of Effigy Mounds. Eagle Rock is an excellent place

to spot bald eagles, which nest along the rivers. The best viewing time is November through March.