

LAS August 2015 Headlines:

13 Ancient Villages Discovered in Wyoming Mountains May Redraw Map of Tribal Migrations

WESTERN DIGS - BY BLAKE DE PASTINO ON NOVEMBER 5, 2013

High in the alpine forests of northwestern Wyoming, archaeologists have discovered more than a dozen villages dating back over 2,000 years, a find that could alter our understanding of the scope of human habitation in the ancient West, as well as the histories and migrations of the people who lived there.

And although the discovery of these sites was in many ways unexpected, the scientists who found them actually predicted they would be there.

The sites are replete with artifacts like groundstones, projectile points, and pottery, plus pipes and other wares carved out of soapstone. They also feature several — sometimes as many as 70 — stone-lined circular platforms hewn out of the mountain slopes: the foundations of wooden “superstructures” thought to have been lodges.

Judging by the settlements’ lofty location, along with their architectural features and artifacts, archaeologists believe they were built by early Numic-speaking peoples, the mountain-dwelling ancestors of the diverse, but related tribes that today include the Comanche, Ute, Shoshone and Northern Paiute.

“In archaeological research, mountains have generally been overlooked as fringes, boundaries, and marginal landscapes,” said Matthew Stirn of the University of Sheffield in an interview. He announced the discovery in a recent study published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science*.

“When we came across [these] villages in the Winds, it proved that not only did family groups live for long periods of time in the mountains, it also showed that this practice occurred rather consistently for several thousand years throughout prehistory.”

As important as the newly found villages are, they were not the first to be discovered in the Wind River Range, Stirn noted.

In 2006, Dr. Richard Adams of Colorado State University and his team found a prehistoric village at 3,500 meters above sea level, with evidence of more than 65 residential structures.

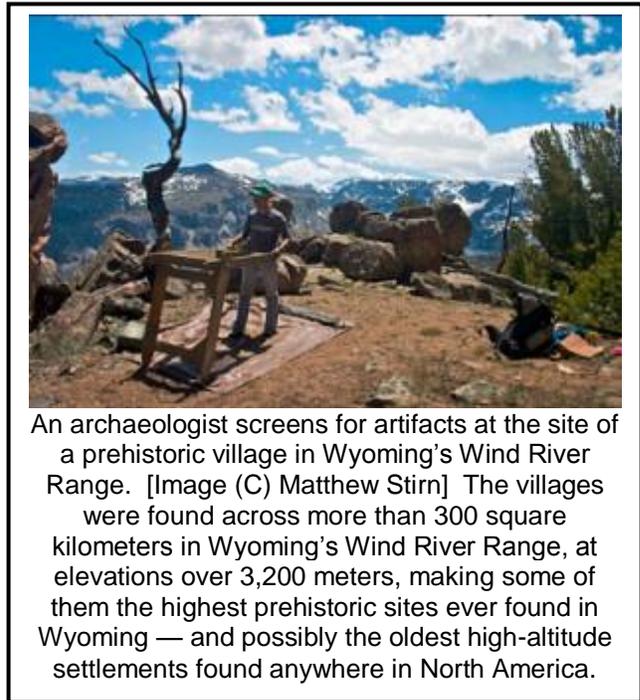
Dubbed High Rise Village, the site featured artifacts and traces of lodges dating over at least 2,500 continuous years, opening up a new frontier of high-altitude archaeology in the intermountain West.

Stirn was part of the team that found High Rise Village, and in the following two years he and Adams, along with Bryon Schroeder of Montana State University, discovered five more villages in the mountain range that dated to around the same era.

“Much to our surprise, the high elevations of the Winds were more dense archaeologically than their surrounding lowlands,” Stirn said.

But perhaps more importantly, he added, “it was immediately apparent that the sites were situated in a distinct pattern.”

Specifically, he said, all of the villages were located in or near stands of whitebark pine trees, which are prolific producers of nutritious nuts. The lodge sites also contained an unusual abundance of tools, like groundstones, that have typically been associated with processing foods like pine nuts.



An archaeologist screens for artifacts at the site of a prehistoric village in Wyoming’s Wind River Range. [Image (C) Matthew Stirn] The villages were found across more than 300 square kilometers in Wyoming’s Wind River Range, at elevations over 3,200 meters, making some of them the highest prehistoric sites ever found in Wyoming — and possibly the oldest high-altitude settlements found anywhere in North America.



Loveland Archaeological Society, Inc.

A Colorado Non-Profit Corporation

So Stirn set out to develop a model to predict the location of more, similar villages. He first determined all of the main traits that the newfound villages had in common — namely, that they were positioned on south-facing, sunny slopes near whitebark pine stands above 3,200 meters in elevation.

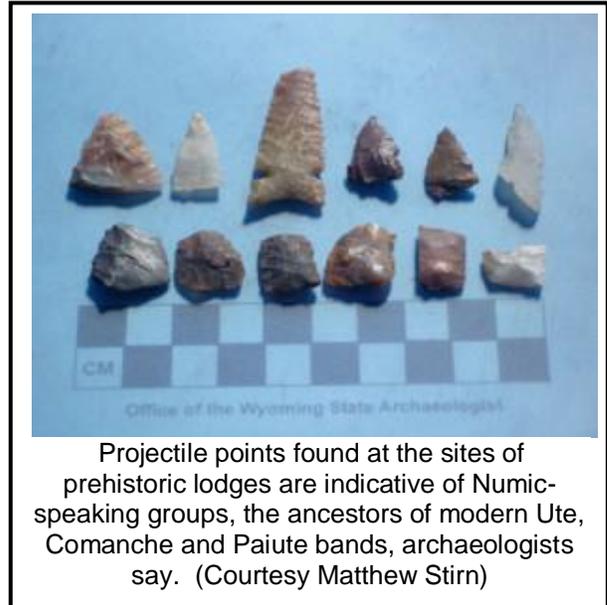
Then, using Landsat satellite imagery, Stirn and his colleagues identified whitebark pine stands in the northern Winds that best fit their model’s description. And in 2010, with the backing of the Explorer’s Club and the Abernethy Research Foundation, they lit out to investigate the sites predicted to be mostly likely to host prehistoric settlements.

In the end, each of the 13 areas they surveyed revealed traces of ancient villages — the remains of lodges, soapstone relics, and nut-milling tools associated with the lifeways of ancient Numic-speaking peoples.

But these sites posed a new quandary: Judging by the artifacts, the newly found villages appear to date to around the heyday of High Rise Village — about 2,000 to 2,500 years ago. But this is centuries older than — and the sites are thousands of kilometers away from — the only other Numic mountain villages known to exist, in Nevada and California.

Those sites farther West, first discovered in the 1980s, betrayed the same influences of Numic culture — including what Stirn describes as “the exact same tool kits” found in Wind River for processing pine nuts and other foods.

Considering that the Numic family of languages extends from Southern California up to Wyoming and Montana, it was conjectured at the time that the culture may have originated in these Southwestern mountains and migrated East.



Projectile points found at the sites of prehistoric lodges are indicative of Numic-speaking groups, the ancestors of modern Ute, Comanche and Paiute bands, archaeologists say. (Courtesy Matthew Stirn)

But the California and Nevada villages were only around 1,400 years old, some 600 to 1,100 years younger than the sites in the Wind River Range.

“If the Numic spread originated in California and moved to Wyoming, how come the Wyoming sites are older than those in California?” Stirn asked.

“It has since been proposed ... that the discovery of earlier villages in Wyoming provide evidence that the Numic spread might have occurred in the opposite direction.”

It could be, in other words, that mountain villages throughout the West could offer what Stirn calls “an archaeological roadmap” that plots the spread of Numic language.

“More corroborating evidence would be necessary to prove this, but for the time being, it is a very thought provoking possibility,” he said.

Excavation of the Wind River villages will help fill in the great missing gaps in the map of Numic history. For now, Stirn said, their discovery reveals the tremendous, and largely overlooked, potential of high-altitude archaeology to rewrite entire chapters of Western American history.

“Since 2006, we have surveyed roughly 800 miles and recorded well over a thousand sites and artifacts above 10,500 feet in Wyoming,” he said.



Fragments of a bowl made from soapstone, or steatite, are another sign of Numic culture. (Courtesy Matthew Stirn)

“This is very exciting, as it suggests that the mountains played an integral role in prehistory and have been frequented by humans consistently for thousands of years.”

(Story provided by Darrel Wilson, Kansas Archaeological Society Membership Coordinator and Secretary)



LAS Find of the Month, August 2015:

Members can bring an artifact to be entered into the competition at the monthly meeting, which will be judged based on the following rules:

1. Must be a member of LAS in good standing.
2. The artifact must be a personal find.
3. It must have been found within the specified time frame, i.e., within the month prior to the meeting.
4. The artifact doesn't have to be a Colorado find—all that matters is that it was found in the last month.

The Find of the Month for August 2015 was made by Rick Miller and Paul Donnelly (co-winners).

Rick Miller Find:

Type: Hannah Blade
 Material: Fossiliferous Chert
 Location: S. Platte River
 Logan County, Colorado



Paul Donnelly Find:

Type: Thompson Submachine Gun
 Caliber: .22 LR
 Location: S. Platte River
 Weld County, Colorado



LAS News and Upcoming Events:

Speakers Needed!

Really!! We need speakers for our 2015 meetings! If you would like to give a presentation or know of someone who would give a great program please contact Andy Coca, Jean Steinhoff or Kevin Zeeck. No experience is necessary, just a passion for our hobby and a willingness to share that passion. Thanks!

September 1, 2015 September meeting. Stone Age Fair Final Preparation Meeting. Come help us brainstorm/plan/prep to make this year's Fair the best ever! This year we celebrate 75 years in Loveland.

September 5-7, 2015 Loveland Archaeological Society Labor Day Weekend field trip to the Harris Ranch at Bosler, Wyoming. See map and instructions on the next page. Respect the landowner and do not abuse the privilege. This includes the following: Do not litter; respect gates, fences and cattle; drive only on established dirt roads and don't bring motorcycles and ATVs; and camp only where designated. To view the Loveland Archaeological Society Code of Ethics please go to the following website: http://stoneagefair.com/LAS_code_of_ethics.htm.

September 26 & 27, 2015 2015 Loveland Stone Age Fair. More information will be provided in the September newsletter. Put the dates on your calendar, and plan now to attend!

- Sponsor of the Annual Loveland Stone Age Fair -
www.stoneagefair.com