



LAS December 2015 Headlines:

Melting Ice in Yellowstone is Revealing Ancient Artifacts Faster Than Researchers Can Handle

The tools, spears and even baskets from ancient Native Americans are emerging faster than archeologists can collect them

By Marissa Fessenden, Smithsonian.com, September 3, 2015

As the climate changes, history is emerging from the glaciers where it was preserved. But glaciers aren't the only previously-frozen forms giving up their artifacts — even smaller ice patches contain discoveries.

For Wyofile, Kelsey Dayton reports that in Yellowstone National Park, archeologists are racing to collect the emerging ice-encased trees, the bodies of animals and the ancient tools, spears and utensils that have been preserved high in the Rocky Mountains.

Ice patches don't move like the larger glaciers, so they are even better suited for preserving material. In the greater Yellowstone ecosystem — an area that includes surrounding mountains and forests — researchers started collecting these artifacts about eight years ago, Craig Lee, an archeologist at the Institute of Arctic Alpine Research in Colorado, told Dayton.

In Yellowstone, Lee, archeologist Staffan Peterson, and others have found animal bones, wooden weapons, and other artifacts ranging from 10,000 year to just a few hundred years old. They've carbon-dated leaves and tree stumps that are more than 5,000 years old.



Ice patches that normally persist through the summer are melting in Yellowstone National Park. (William Campbell/Corbis)

Dayton writes:

"The artifacts released by melting ice in the high country are important because they provide excellent clues to the past. Archaeologists normally only have access to what can survive thousands of years — usually items made of stone. Yet stone tools are only a fraction of what ancient people used to survive. Ice patches, meanwhile, cryogenically preserve organic artifacts such as wood, textiles, leather and animal fur, and provide a much broader perspective of what people used in their daily lives, Peterson said."

The land high in the mountains may seem chilly and inhospitable now, but ancient animals did venture to the green areas made wet by snow in even higher regions. The people hunting them followed.



What is believed to be a spear shaft is prepared for transport to a lab for study.
Photo by National Park Service



Loveland Archaeological Society, Inc.

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In Yellowstone, the melting ice has offered up ancient tree stumps, plants, animals and insects as well as dart shafts and basketry, Lee and a co-author write in a special issue of Yellowstone Science (pdf). Glacier National Park also has ice patches protecting history — The Blackfeet, Salish, Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai peoples left fire rings, campsites and stone tools that are slowly melting out of the ice there.

Yet just as they are in locations around the world, the artifacts in Yellowstone and Glacier are emerging faster than researchers can keep up. "Once those artifacts melt out, they are gone," Peterson tells Wyofile. "They just fall apart. ... They are vanishing. I get the feeling of 'My God, these things are melting right in front of me and any value they have for science is melting away with them.'"

LAS Find of the Month, December 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 December 2015 was made by Shane Skutvik.

Type: McKean
Material: Quartzite
Location: Arapahoe County, Colorado



LAS News and Upcoming Events:

Speakers Needed!

Really!! We need speakers for our 2016 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!

- Ongoing: Univ of Colorado Museum of Natural History. "Unearthed: Ancient Life in the Boulder Valley" exhibit featuring the Clovis artifacts from the Mahaffy Cache found in Boulder, Colorado in 2008. The exhibit will run through September 2016. Cost is free.
- January 5, 2016 January meeting. Program: Allen and related obliquely-flaked transitional paleo points. Bring your Allen, Frederick, Anderson, Angostura, and other diagonally-flaked artifacts and share your favorite hunting stories. Let's have plenty of examples on hand!
- February 2, 2016 February meeting. Program: 2015 LAS/Harry Walts Scholarship recipient Leslie Brown will discuss her research for her PhD.