



In the Shadow of the Coyote Penis: High Elevation Archaeology in NW Wyoming

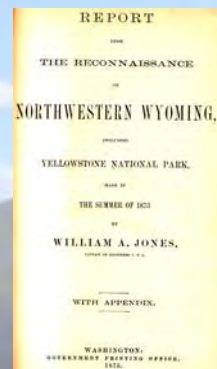
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Since 2002, the GRSLE project has conducted survey in several montane basins in NW Wyoming at elevations above 3000m. In 2008 preliminary investigation near Washakie Needles (referred to as Coyote Penis by the Shoshone) yielded a high density of sites ranging from late Paleoindian through Late Archaic in age. Site distribution patterns and artifact assemblage content from the Washakie Needles survey are compared to several other high elevation survey areas in the Greybull River drainage.

A High Elevation, Focal Landscape?



Headquarters Department of the Platte,
Omaha, Neb., May 15, 1873

Capt. William A. Jones, Corps of Engineers, will proceed as soon as practicable to Northwestern Wyoming, and there make a reconnaissance of the country within the territory about the headwaters of the Snake, Green, Big Horn, Grey Bull, Clark's Fork, and Yellowstone Rivers. He will organize and equip his party at Fort Bridger.

On Saturday, July 19th, 1873, Captain William Jones and two members of his party attempted to climb a "peak, to which I have given the name of the 'Washakie Needles' [which] is a terrible crag. It's appearance from the valley of Owl Creek, above our camp, is simply frightful" (Jones 1875:14). Although Jones' group did not reach the summit, their westward foray from their main travel route into and then across the western margins of the Big Horn Basin to Washakie Needles yielded one of the first written records of Wyoming's high elevation archaeology. In recounting one of the "Indian trials" encountered, Jones describes one major route that

...crossed to the headwaters of Owl Creek near the Washakie Needles, whence it passes up this stream to its source passing through a remarkably fine hunting ground for mountain sheep. There is here one of those luxurious mountain-parks which Nature seems occasionally to throw off in the very midst of her most forbidding works. Its existence would never be suspected from without, as there is about it nothing but the most desolate and forbidding scenery...This park bears many evidences of having been used as a hiding-place. Our Indians knew nothing of it, and yet there were all through it numerous trails, old lodge-poles, bleached bones of game, and old camps of Cheyennes and Apapahoes. (1875:54-55)

Although Jones's name for the peak that towers above this park remains (but today with the spelling Washakie Needles), Shimkin (1947:Table 1) notes that the more colorful Eastern Shoshone name for this prominent feature was *i'saw'ë* or Coyote-Penis. This landmark helped identify what Shimkin described as one of the five "foci" delineating Eastern Shoshone territory. This location, "a pocket valley near the head of Owl Creek" (1947:248), is shown on Shimkin's Map 4 as being immediately to the north of Washakie Needles and was known by the Shoshone as *nda'wnaw'sua*. The English translation Shimkin provides for this valley, "(He)-packs-the-dry-meat" seems to substantiate Jones' interpretations that the high mountain valleys around Washakie Needles had been important Shoshone hunting territories.

2008 Washakie Needles Survey

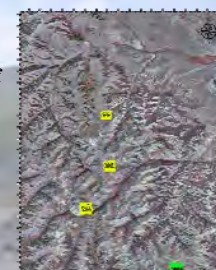
The 2008 survey was limited to a brief, 6 day examination of only a very small (~94 ha) portion of the Washakie Needles grazing allotment. Although our plans had been to survey areas in the higher elevation areas (>3200 m [-10500']), the extent of the survey was limited due to the high density of materials encountered between 3000-3150m in elevation. Surface artifacts were subjected to in-field analysis with locational and descriptive data recorded using Trimble JunoST GPS units, which are both effective, rapid field data capture devices but are also easily recharged on portable solar units.

The majority of the survey was conducted above timberline in open, alpine grasslands. While the documentary record suggested a rich Late Prehistoric record, in fact the survey yielded limited Late points, half of which were found as isolates rather than in sites. While the small survey area did not meet our expectations of an especially intensive Late Prehistoric use, it did yield evidence of the long-term heavy use of the mountain basin over the last several millennia. Two sites have the potential for in situ Paleoindian occupations. Both Early and Late Archaic occupations are also well represented.

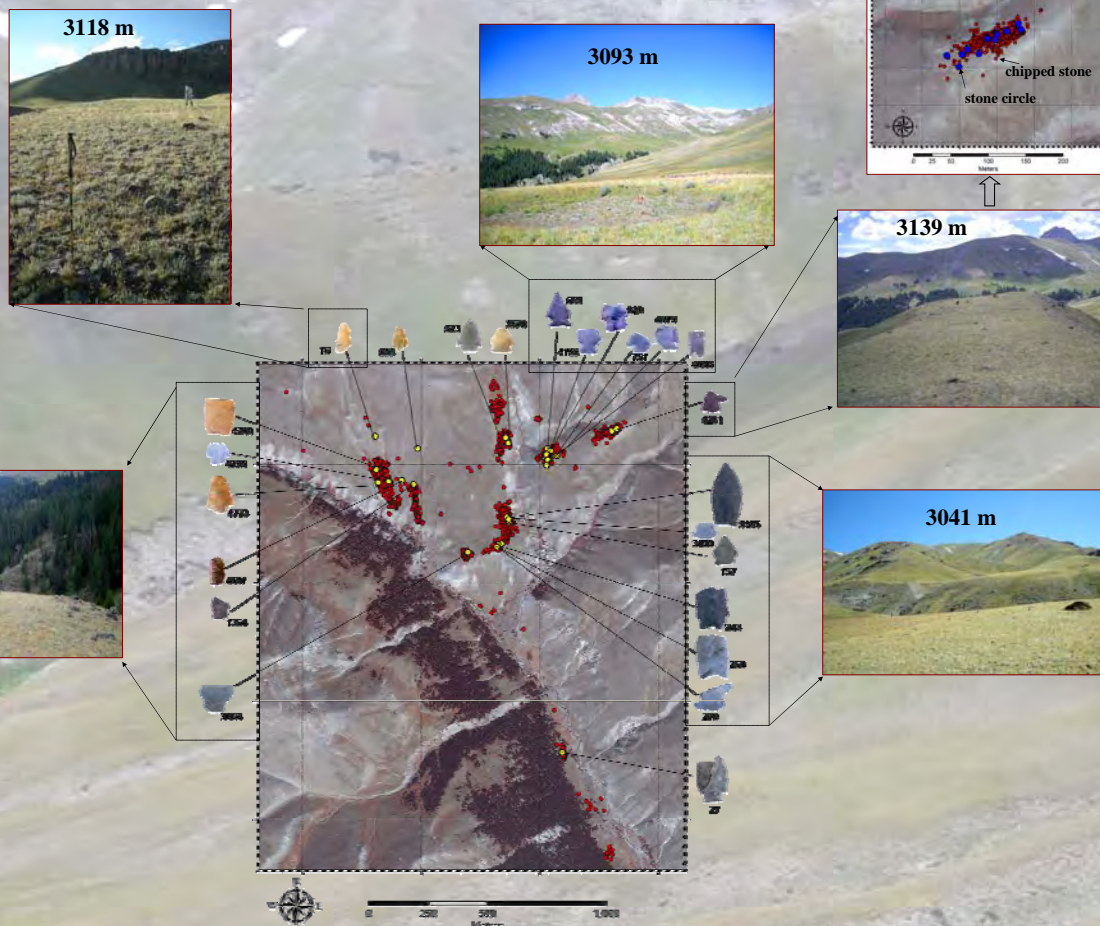


Remarkable, but not Exceptional

Although not necessarily of the expected time periods, prehistoric use of the Washakie Needles area seems to have been of long-term significance to northwestern Wyoming groups. Is this intensity of use indicative that Washakie Needles has been a 'focal' landscape for thousand's of years? What sorts of archaeological remains should we anticipate in higher elevation (>3000 m or approximately 9850')? Is the Washakie Needles record unique or representative?



As an initial comparative evaluation of these questions, we have selected 3 other 3000+ m survey areas that the GRSLE project has documented over the last several years. As indicated by the summary data below, the Washakie Needles area does not stand out as being unique. In each of the three additional surveyed areas, Late Prehistoric occupation is comparatively light, obsidian is rare, and while at the higher end of the surface artifact density, Washakie Needles, is by no means outside the range of variation, or for that matter, the highest density area recorded.



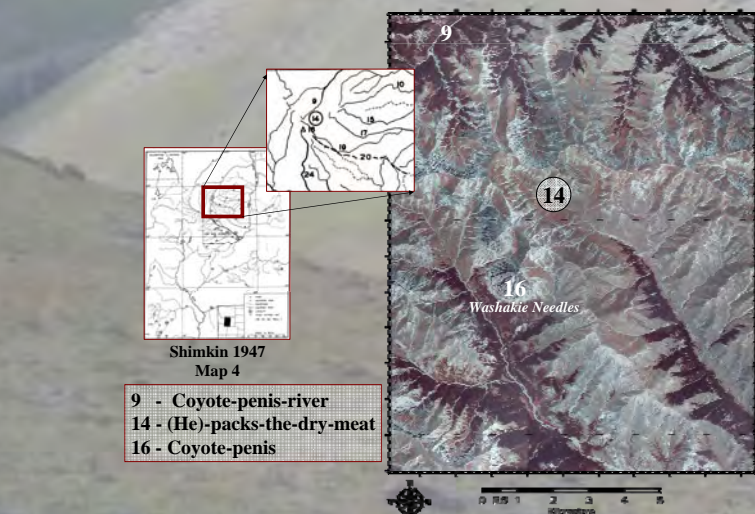
FF Survey Summary:	
Survey area	= 102 ha
Total Chipped stone	= 2885
Average artifact density	= 28.3/ha
Obsidian Frequency	= 60 (2.1%)
Average Artifact Elev.	= 3099 m
Average Artifact Max.Len	= 16.5 mm
Projectile points:	
Paleoindian	= 2
Early Archaic	= 3
Middle Archaic	= 6
Late Archaic	= 10
Late Prehistoric	= 3
Fragments and undet.	= 12
Points & Frag. Density	= 0.4/ha

MC Survey Summary:	
Survey area	= 94 ha
Total Chipped stone	= 1097
Average artifact density	= 11.7/ha
Obsidian Frequency	= 11 (1.0%)
Average Artifact Elev.	= 3184 m
Average Artifact Max.Len	= 15.0 mm
Projectile points:	
Early Archaic	= 2
Middle Archaic	= 1
Late Archaic	= 1
Late Prehistoric	= 2
Fragments and undet.	= 3
Points & Frag. Density	= 0.1/ha

DH Survey Summary:	
Survey area	= 36 ha
Total Chipped stone	= 2657
Average artifact density	= 73.8/ha
Obsidian Frequency	= 1 (0.0%)
Average Artifact Elev.	= 3310 m
Average Artifact Max.Len	= 21.6 mm
Projectile points:	
Early Archaic	= 1
Late Archaic	= 2
Fragments and undet.	= 2
Points & Frag. Density	= 0.1/ha

WN 2008 Survey Summary:	
Survey area	= 94 ha (239 ac)
Total Chipped stone	= 4964
Average artifact density	= 52.8/ha
Obsidian Frequency	= 42 (0.9%)
Sites	= 11
Average Artifact Elev.	= 3069 m
Average Artifact Max.Len	= 18.7 mm
Projectile points:	
Paleoindian	= 3
Early Archaic	= 5
Late Archaic	= 12
Late Prehistoric	= 4
Fragments and undet.	= 6
Points & Frag. Density	= 0.3/ha

Washakie Needles represents a remarkable record of high elevation prehistoric landuse. However, as indicated by comparison with other 3000+m comparably surveyed areas in the Absaroka's to the north, the remarkable Washakie Needles record may be more indicative of a more general intensive montane landuse pattern rather than a focal use of the areas around this distinctive, prominent peak.



Together, Jones' descriptions from 1873 and Shimkin's ethnographic information from research on the Wind River reservation in 1937 and 1938 paint a picture of the Washakie needles area as one of intriguing archaeological potential. The accounts of numerous remnants of a material record suggesting heavy use (Jones) coupled with provocative place names such as He-packs-dry-meat (Shimkin) both suggest that the area had a significant use by the Shoshone and that the area should have considerable evidence of Late Prehistoric, Protohistoric, and Historic use as a hunting territory. However, as of July 2008, the Wyoming SHPO Cultural Records database indicated not a single prehistoric archaeological site having been recorded within the entire Township surrounding the Washakie Needles.

As part of a cooperative cost-share agreement between the GRSLE (Greybull River Sustainable Landscape Ecology) project based at Colorado State University and the Shoshone National Forest, a systematic survey of He-packs-the-dry meat (aka, Washakie Needles C&H Allotment) was initiated in August, 2008.

References Cited

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1875 Report upon the Reconnaissance of Northwestern Wyoming including Yellowstone Park made in the summer of 1873. 43rd Congress 1st Session, House Executive Document 285. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.

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1947 Wind River Shoshone Ethnogeography. University of California Anthropological Records 5(4):245-290.

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