



We are not the first



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

A friend of our family owned a fly-in fishing camp in remote northern Ontario. His concession, leased lands and lakes from the government, included over 300 square miles. Many of the lakes in his area required portages or float planes to access.

On one of our summer visits, he explained that he was opening up a new lake. It would require a 2-mile portage to get there, but it had never been fished before. We were to be the first people to ever fish this unnamed lake. We jumped at the idea like kids to a candy bar.

As we paddled along in our canoe, I was feeling pretty smug. Catching pike and smallmouth bass on just about every cast, and seeing virgin north woods for scenery. It was heaven on earth for a guy like me. I felt like a Star Trek episode, “To boldly go where no man had gone before.” I had found a secret place.

Then it happened. We were working the shoreline along a spot where the rock shoreline made a steep drop, like a short cliff, into the water. Along the face of the cliff, near the water’s edge, were a series of petroglyphs. Suddenly I realized we were not the first to be in these waters. It was like someone let the air out of my tire. These Indian drawings were made by Chippewa Indians about 300 years before I saw them. This lake was a secret place for someone else, long before I ever set foot in this country.

How many times have you been deep in the woods, and found evidence of someone or something else that had been there first? I am not talking about the candy wrapper or beer can left behind by some slob. I am referring to the arrowhead left by a long ago hunter, or the drawings to tell a story.

Colorado has a substantial amount of Indian writings. These



(Above) Just when you think you found a secret spot, you discover that the spot belonged to someone else long before you got here. (Right) Petroglyphs on a remote lake in Canada. (Photos by Mark Rackay)

writings fall within four general time periods, but what we generally see now are from the Protohistoric and Historic time periods.

In the western half of Colorado, most of the drawings we see are from the tribes of the Shoshone, Ute and Paiute. These tribes dominated our region from the 1500s through the 1800s. The drawings will show game animals, trail maps, and bear paws, and later included stick figures with bows. Most of those basic drawings were better than what I can draw now.

I have located some petroglyphs near the Lake City cutoff that appear over a thousand years old. They are in a cave with soot-darkened walls from many years of use by earlier



visitors. The location looks over a small river valley and the surrounding woods, making it a very beautiful location. There were no cigarette butts or beer cans, so I am sure modern man has not found the place.

Locally, Shavano Valley has a beautiful site with Indian drawings. The site is a place where hunters and gatherers were drawn because of a natural

artesian spring. Anyone interested in seeing this place should contact the Ute Indian Museum in Montrose and arrange a tour with a guide.

Another thing you will come across in the woods, that lets you know you are not the first, is a game trail. There are even a few game trails that are marked by petroglyphs, which would indicate these trails have been there a long time.

One would be very naïve to think that a game trail is something made recently. Animals use some trails only during certain times of the year, while others are traveled year round. Usually the trails lead to water, food sources or bedding areas, and others are just travel routes used during migrations.

I have a friend who always seems to find arrowheads, whenever he is in the woods.

When he finds one, he tells me the location. He tells me that most of them are near game trails, which also serves as evidence to the age of the trails. My friend does not keep the arrowheads he finds. He leaves them where he found them stating “they don’t belong to us.” I respect his resolve for that.

Some folks have a knack for spotting them on the ground. I never find them and I don’t even look anymore. If I look at the ground, I am not watching where I am going, and bad things happen. I don’t get back up as easily as I used to and besides, I don’t see any game when I look at the ground.

For a traveler in the woods, a game trail is a good thing to find. Animals usually follow the path of least resistance and a trail can make for an easier walk. Trails made by animals the size of elk are best for humans because the low branches will be easier for us to clear.

I came across a game trail in Northern Canada one time. The trail was used by caribou and was very old. The trail was worn down at least 12 inches deeper than the surrounding landscape. The folks who ran the camp said the trail was over 5 thousand years old.

Game trails and petroglyphs are a language written into the landscape we traverse. They will tell a story to anyone who understands the language. A true outdoor person should take time to learn the language.

I am not the first to discover this “secret place” because someone or something else was here first. I have however, learned to listen to the story the place tells me about the others who were here first. If you find one of these places, listen in silence and hear the story for yourself.

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