

Prehistoric residents pecked out and painted images on Illinois cliffs and caves at least 1,000 years ago. Now, archaeologists are drawing attention to this informational trove.

Illinois' Rock Artists

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

Running fingertips across the surface of grainy, weathered sandstone, archaeologist Mark Wagner stares ahead, deep in thought, as if reading Braille.

"That's one of the things about rock art," Wagner says after a moment.

"Depending on what time of day you're looking at it, the images can be really hard to see, or they can jump right out at you."

At Piney Creek Ravine Nature Preserve, home of the state's largest known assemblage of prehistoric rock art, it's doubtful anyone would overlook at least some of the messages here. In fact, the paintings and inscriptions often speak quite plainly.

"J. Schroeder June 12, 1904," declares one, century-old graffito.

Below Schroeder's block-letter proclamation appear various initials and names, all added since 19th-century residents "discovered" this secluded, prehistoric art gallery in a ravine in what is now northern Jackson County.

However, those most-obvious marks aren't the reason Piney Creek is included on the National Register of Historic Places. Upon closer examination (if one



Prehistoric rock art at Piney Creek Ravine Nature Preserve suffered more than a century of vandalism before the state acquired the 198-acre site in 1972. Despite the graffiti, many ancient images are still discernible at this 198-acre site in southwest Illinois.

manages to stare beyond the relatively recent additions), a ghostly collection of weathered red streaks and shallow, pecked-out lines emerges. The dream-like interpretations of deer flow across the surface of the stone. There's a figure with a bow, taking aim. Distorted arms trail away into exaggerated serpents.

"Here's a neat one," the archaeologist says suddenly, moving along the wall as a curator might stroll through a museum. "This is the only known rock-art image of a canoe in Illinois."

Indeed, the sketch of what appears to be a primitive canoe with several human passengers is still discernible on the grainy stone. It's a remarkable insight into the prehistory of Illinois, especially since few people in Illinois ever would have guessed rock art here survived the ages.

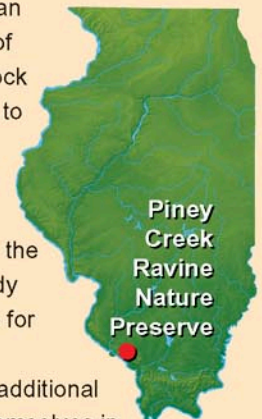
Essentially, everybody—including many archaeologists—assumed Mid-

western weather had wiped clean all rocks ages ago.

"There was a perception that rock art was virtually all gone in the East," Wagner explains. "What we're finding out is the opposite. A lot of it has survived."

How much? Wagner suspects there could be more than 1,000 examples of undocumented rock art in Illinois, due to the easily overlooked nature of weathered messages, as well as the fact almost nobody has a trained eye for such sleuthing.

What's more, additional images reveal themselves in surprising locations. During a 2001 Department of Natural Resources-funded study of the rock art at Piney Creek



The pecked-out shape of a human hand, from a boulder in Jackson County, is believed to be more than 2,000 years old.

Ravine, Wagner and his crew identified multiple, previously undocumented images. Some were mere inches away from known rock art, but were invisible beneath the nearby marks from vandals.

The difficulty in locating surviving rock art is understandable. Images which were drawn or painted onto stone (called pictographs) today are often faded and leached into the bedrock. Chipped or pecked images (called petroglyphs) sometimes are weathered smooth—or nearly so—resembling those hard-to-read grave stones from early America.

Furthermore, the images are rarely those easy-to-recognize, comic-book examples of American Indian rock art. The marks placed on cliffs and caves in Illinois represent figures and forces of prehistoric Illinois life. The rock art might signal a warning to onlookers, or announce the presence of an early predecessor. Serpent shapes were common, as well as eccentric figures with disproportionate limbs. A simple cross was often used, as well as composite, bird-like creatures. Naturally occurring geological features, such as a crack or iron-rich deposit, sometimes were incorporated into designs. Sometimes, images which were drawn onto the stones were later pecked away—or partly removed.



While the symbols and figures on Illinois rocks have a meaning hidden in prehistory, archaeologists increasingly recognize recurring themes which appear to relate to beliefs and fears of the people whose messages are just now being documented.

The wealth of cultural information holds tremendous potential for a better understanding of the prehistoric lives of Illinois. But, first, the images must be located.

"The unglaciated areas of northern Illinois are a great example of where rock art must exist," Wagner states. "There are hundreds of documented rock art sites in southwestern Wisconsin; across the state line in Illinois, where the geology is similar, none have been reported. That's only because nobody is looking."

Hikers and "explorers" of the outdoors might notice rock art in remote locations or in places where thousands of visitors pass by every year. Anyone

Facts at a glance

Piney Creek Ravine Nature Preserve:

c/o Randolph State Fish and Wildlife Area, 4301 S. Lake Dr., Chester, IL 62233.

Telephone: (618) 826-2706.

Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R4/pcr.htm or www.virtual.parkland.edu/ias/publications/Illinois_Rock_Art/ISMrockartA.htm.

Directions: West of DuQuoin and south of Steeleville on the Randolph-Jackson County line. From Route 4 in Campbell Hill, take Rock Crusher Road west to Piney Creek Road. Watch for sign.

encountering such marking should be aware that all rock art is protected by law in Illinois, and defacing such cultural treasures can result in strict penalties. It should also be noted that modifying or "enhancing" existing images (such as adding chalk or new pigments) is against the law.

Yet Wagner doesn't want to discourage people from visiting known rock art sites such as Piney Creek Ravine or Millstone Bluff in southeastern Illinois. He also welcomes the occasional report or inquiry from the public regarding suspected unreported sites. Wagner can be reached at Southern Illinois University's Center for Archaeological Investigations at (618) 453-5035 or via email at mjwagner@siu.edu.



Not all rock art is easy to see. Archaeologist Mark Wagner examines one of the petroglyphs at Piney Creek Ravine, where additional images have been identified in recent years.

