

SERENDIPITY SHELTER

Serendipity Shelter is located in extreme northwestern Nevada (northern Washoe County) in the High Rock Canyon Wilderness Area, and is managed by the Bureau of Land Management as part of the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area. The shelter itself is about 24 m long by 19 m wide and about 3 m high and is located southern edge of an extensive volcanic tableland. Although the site borders the Columbia Plateau, its archaeological evidence and surrounding landscape indicates a lifestyle typical of the Great Basin culture area, with the exception, perhaps, of a greater concentration of root plants available for harvesting and processing.

The site has several springs and seasonal flowing waters close by that attract game animals to the general location, making it ideal as a camping or living site. Resources for the region are typical of the Great Basin Sagebrush Steppe environment and include Indian Rice Grass and Great Basin wild rye (attracting grazers), as well as the root crops bitterroot, biscuit root, yampa, and camas, all rich sources of carbohydrates. Regional fauna include deer, antelope, bighorn sheep, rabbits, sage grouse, and migratory waterfowl.

Serendipity Shelter was first recorded in 1982 by a team of BLM archaeologists led by Garth Portillo who identified 12 rock art panels. Six panels were reported to be pictographs, five had both pictographs and petroglyphs, and one consisted of two cupules. The 1982 team recorded at least 51 designs at eye level (between 20 and 185 cm from the floor) in the east half of the shelter and no images on the walls of the west half. In 1995-97, Eric Ritter (BLM Redding) visited the shelter re-recorded the site during a BLM rock art reconnaissance of the Massacre Lake Basin. In addition, the BLM and Melinda Leach from the University of North Dakota recorded the archaeology of Serendipity Shelter in 1998.

These archaeological investigations revealed that Serendipity Shelter was a multipurpose occupation site (illustrated by the presence of a midden, ground stone, debitage, stone tools, projectile points, food remains, and rock art) that has been used at least since the middle Holocene (illustrated by the presence of Elko, Eastgate, and Desert Side-notch points, and ceramics).



Interior of Serendipity Shelter

The shelter appears to have been occupied from 6500 BP to 1500 BP. Artifacts from the midden include ground stone fragments, red and yellow ochre stained metates, fire-affected rock, burnt bone, burnt food plant remains, hammer stones, debitage, end scrapers, and abraders, possibly used to process the abundance of root crops available at this site. Exotics found in the midden include Olivella shell beads from the Pacific Coast, sand tempered brownware ceramics (not local), and two sherds of Desert Greyware from southeastern Idaho and northern Utah. All of these suggest some later prehistoric occupation and trade with other regions. Serendipity Shelter is near a source of cryptocrystalline (CCS) toolstone and is also surrounded by local obsidian sources, important resources for the site. Tools at the site were made from local and exotic CCS, obsidian, and basalt.



Dave Valentine (BLM) and NRAF volunteers recording rock art at Serendipity Shelter

Recording Serendipity Shelter

In July 2007, Dave Valentine (BLM), assisted by NRAF volunteers Signa Pendegraft, Don Murray, and Joanne Murray re-recorded the rock art in Serendipity Shelter in order to assess its condition. The field team closely inspected the walls of Serendipity Shelter and identified 12 rock art panels that roughly correlated with the panels previously reported: 10 pictographs, 1 petroglyph and 1 panel containing both techniques. Each rock art panel was then recorded by a scale drawing and photographed in black-and-white, digital, and color slide formats.

The nature of pictographs is such that photographic representation is difficult. To supplement the photographs and scaled drawings, each panel was described verbally. In addition, the color in the digital photographs was manipulated using D-stretch to enhance color and reveal hidden details.



Rock art panel, before (left) and after (right) D-stretch enhancement

The changing condition of Serendipity Shelter's rock art

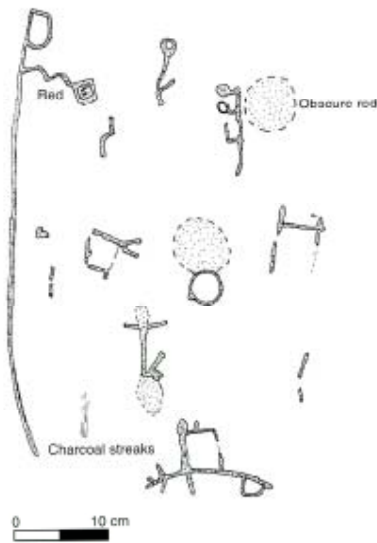
The site has more than 50 design elements, including anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, geometric and organic motifs. All design elements at Serendipity are types represented at other sites in the more extensive pictograph record in the northern Great Basin region.

Currently, red is the most common pigment at Serendipity Shelter, but this does not necessarily mean that red pigment was always the predominant color at the site. The site's rock art appears to be deteriorating through time, most likely due to natural processes such as wind-driven sand abrasion, dust adherence, and water percolation. Elements that appeared to be well defined in 1982 and 1995 could only be identified as smudges in 2007. White elements seem to be the most susceptible to deterioration through time, followed by yellow, and then red. Although red elements lose detail and fade toward smudges over time, they do not seem to fade away as completely as do elements painted in other colors.

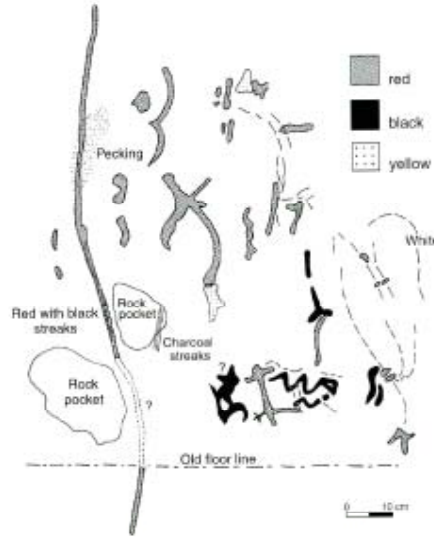


Faded pictograph at Serendipity Shelter (Panel 9A, NRAF 2007)

The visibility of the pictographs in the shelter varies according to light conditions, making it difficult to assess changes if the panels are not recorded under the same light conditions. The problem with assessing changes in condition of rock art panels is best illustrated by comparing the panel recorded as Panel 3 by previous surveys (Portillo in 1982, Ritter in 995) with NRAF's 2007 Panels 9A and 9B.



BLM 1982 Panel 3*



Ritter 1995 Panel 3*



NRAF 2007 Panels 9A
and 9B combined

*2002. Ritter, Eric W. The Rationalist Scientific Method in Rock Art Studies: The Serendipity Shelter, Nevada Example. In *American Indian Rock Art*, Volume 28, Alanah Woody, ed. pp 7. American Rock Art Research Association, Tucson, Az.

All three surveys recorded this panel somewhat differently; they concur on the long vertical line on the left side of the panel but after that there is almost no correlation. The 1982 recordation showed the vertical line as black and recorded 13 design elements that are all abstract types, i.e., no zoomorphs or anthropomorphs. In 1995, the vertical line was recorded as black and red and containing 33 design elements, including a zoomorph. In 2007, the panel was observed to contain, in addition to the vertical line, 3 zoomorphs and 1 anthropomorph, along with at least 10 other abstract elements. Although fading accounts for some of the changes through time as elements become less defined, these differences cannot be attributed to deterioration alone. If they were, the panel would become less complex through time. Instead, the complexity of the recorded panel increases from 1982 to 1995. This suggests that at least some of the changes observed in the rock art in Serendipity Shelter are the result of the conditions under which it was recorded.

This project illustrated that recording sites that contain faded pictographs can be challenging. Further, differences are to be expected in the observations made at different times and under different conditions. This highlights the importance of periodic re-recording of such sites to build a full picture of their content and character, as well as showing that rapid changes in condition are possible even in contexts that are not fully exposed to the elements.

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