

FIRST DRAFT

Indians used different technique to hunt buffalo in the mountains

Buffalo jumps — sites where Indians chased animals over cliffs so they could gather meat, hides and other parts of the creatures — are well known in the archaeology of the West.

In the mountains of western Colorado, however, buffalo jumps were rare. Instead, native people employed another technique for trapping and killing bison, the animals commonly called buffalo in North America.

“The hunters would force bison up a steep draw,” said Holly “Sonny” Shelton, project archaeologist for the Western Colorado Bison Project, which was conducted under the auspices of the Dominguez Archaeological Research Group.

Because it’s difficult for bison to raise their heads high, Shelton explained, they don’t like climbing up steep trails.

So they would try to turn around and exit the draw. But hunters would be waiting at the bottom to kill them.

“You couldn’t hunt deer or elk like that” because those animals would simply race to the top and escape, she added. “But it seemed to work for bison because people used it over many centuries.”

The hunting method was employed before Indians had horses, Shelton’s research showed, and continued into the 1800s, well after horses arrived on the scene.

Bison bones found at the bottom of such draws — often with marks showing evidence of human activity, or “cultural modification” — helped Shelton determine the hunting technique. Bison rock art that was found frequently at or near these natural bison traps bolstered the idea about the hunting method.

Shelton began working on the Western Colorado Bison Project several years ago, researching bison bones found in seven counties on the Western Slope — Moffat, Rio Blanco, Garfield, Mesa, Eagle, Delta and Montrose. But her interest in bison began much earlier, when she was growing up on a Colorado ranch.

“As a young person” with Native American ancestry, “I learned to paint bison skulls and to respect the buffalo,” she said.

Shelton also heard stories from neighboring ranchers of bison once roaming the Piceance Creek basin and elsewhere on the Western Slope. Later, she read accounts from trappers and explorers such as Joe Meek, Osborne Russell, Jim Bridger and John Fremont, who reported seeing bison in Colorado’s mountains.

Shelton began working in archaeology in Arizona’s Salt River Valley in the 1970s. Her career took a different track when she became a psychiatric nurse certified through the American Nurses Credentialing Center, work she continues to do with Home Care of the Grand Valley.

A dozen years ago, she reignited her archaeological career, joining the Dominguez Archae-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOLLY SHELTON

Holly “Sonny” Shelton works recently at an archaeological dig.

ological Research Group in Grand Junction and working with Palisade’s Curtis Martin on the statewide Wickiup Project.

Shelton participated in several archaeological projects in which bison bones were identified. As she was writing one report, “it occurred to me we needed a database” of bison bone discoveries in the region, she said.

She began working with regional museums that had bison bones in their collections and examining old archaeological reports.

Narrowing her focus to the seven Western Slope counties, Shelton eventually evaluated 250 bison bones and found 38 percent of them had evidence of cultural modification.

“I thought I’d find 20 to 30 bones,” she said. “I never thought there would be so many.”

Some bison bones were found at elevations as high as 10,000 feet, and they ranged in time over many millennia.

“We found two skulls of bison priscus, or steppe bison, from the last Ice Age,” she said.

Bison priscus was an ancestor of the modern bison, and carbon-testing of one skull showed it was 11,700 years old.

Most of the bison bones evaluated were much more recent.

“We found a noticeable spike in butchered bones from the 1450s to the early 1800s,” she said.

The earliest of those were from animals likely butchered by Fremont Indians, but from the 1600s onward, they were predominantly bison harvested by Utes and Shoshones.

She also heard from private individuals who told of bison bones with metal arrowheads imbedded in them. One told of a stone arrowhead, she said.

The Western Slope wasn’t home to gigantic herds of bison such as those that once roamed the Great Plains. Instead, bison in the mountains usually moved in groups of 10 to 20 animals.



Rock art from Rangely area shows a bison and the head of a horse.

There is an ongoing debate over whether the buffalo in the mountains were actually a different subspecies from those of the Great Plains — called mountain bison or wood bison — or simply developed physical differences because of their environment.

According to the book “American Buffalo,” “Taxonomists once described the wood bison as a separate species altogether ... However, modern genetic research has revealed essentially no difference between the two.”

Still, one can find arguments online for both sides of the debate. Shelton didn’t attempt to answer that question.

“The primary objective of the project was data collection,” she explained.

In 1995, during a construction project in downtown Montrose, 17 bison bones were dug up, and radio carbon-dating showed them to be approximately from the 1840s, she said.

“That’s the most bones that have been found from the entire Uncompahgre Valley,” despite rock art that suggests they were once present there, Shelton said. One reason may be that “there’s not a lot of erosion there” to uncover bones.

As with other archaeological items, Shelton urged people who discover bones they suspect came from bison to leave them in place.

“Take pictures. Don’t disturb them,” she said. “If they’re moved, the information they hold could be lost.”

When bones are found on public lands, people should contact the appropriate agency — U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management or state agency, she added.

Also, they should be respectful of Ute Indians and other tribes who hold bison as sacred.

Shelton hopes to eventually expand her research to other counties in western Colorado. The work she’s already done was accomplished with assistance from the Colorado Historical Society State Historical Fund, as well Dominguez project archaeologist Carl Conner and database architect Michael Berry.

Information from Holly Shelton; “American Buffalo,” by Steven Rinella; “American Bison: A Natural History,” by Dale F. Lott.

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IN BRIEF SENTINEL STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

Man, 76, hospitalized after rollover

A 76-year-old man was taken to St. Mary’s Medical Center after he was involved in a one-car rollover crash on U.S. Highway 50 shortly after 3 p.m. Sunday.

According to the Colorado State Patrol, the man was driving a silver Jeep that left the roadway near mile marker 40 just north of Whitewater. Emergency responders had to extricate the man from the vehicle. Colorado State Patrol Trooper Josh Lewis said the crash is still under investigation.

NioCorp official to discuss plan for mine

A producer of raw materials for advanced alloys will speak Tuesday to the Grand Junction Petroleum and Mining Club.

Jim Sims, vice president for external affairs for Colorado-based NioCorp, will discuss the company’s plans to develop a \$1 billion niobium/titanium/scandium mine and processing facility near Elk Creek, Nebraska.

Sims also is director of investor and public relations for IBC Advanced Alloys, which is developing new high-performance alloys designed to incorporate the critical metals to be produced at Elk Creek. The meeting is at 6:30 p.m. at Two Rivers Convention Center. Admission is \$25 per person.

Pot sales hit a record \$1.5 billion

DENVER — The Colorado Department of Revenue says marijuana shops in the state made a record \$1.51 billion in sales of medical and recreational cannabis, edibles and concentrate products in 2017. Data released Friday say adult-use sales topped \$1.09 billion during the year, with the remaining \$416.52 million coming from medical marijuana. Data says Colorado collected upward of \$247 million in taxes and fees revenue from marijuana sales.

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Suspects are sought in fatal shooting of cow

Crime Stoppers is seeking information on the shooting death of a cow that happened in the area of 29 and D roads earlier this month.

Three gunshots were reported in the early morning hours of Feb. 4 and a dark-colored, two-door car was seen leaving the area of an open field located in the 2900 block of D Road. Later that morning, a dead cow was reported in the area.

Total estimated property loss is more than \$2,000.

Anyone with information about the suspects in this crime is asked to call Crime Stoppers at 241-7867.

Information leading to an arrest can earn up to \$1,000 cash reward and the reporting party will remain anonymous. For information, visit www.241stop.com.

According to the Grand Junction Police Department:

■ Joshua Stem, 20, was issued a summons for alleged criminal mischief on Feb. 3 in the area of Interstate 70 and Horizon Drive.

■ Seth Carter, 33, was arrested for alleged felony menacing and assault in the 500 block of 28½ Road on Feb. 4.

■ Echo Rocha, 33, was arrested Friday on

suspicion of possessing a schedule II controlled substance and drug paraphernalia, as well as violating bond conditions and traffic infractions.

■ Daniel Rocha, 38, was arrested Friday on suspicion of possessing a schedule II controlled substance and drug paraphernalia, as well as alleged violation of a protection order.

■ Shaun Hamilton, 20, was arrested on three warrants on Friday.

■ Colt Carson Wallace, 24, was issued a summons on suspicion of careless driving, failing to present evidence of insurance and driving a vehicle under the influence of alcohol on Saturday.

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