

RECENTLY IDENTIFIED SITES ON THE CARRIZO PLAIN NATURAL AREA

David W. Kayser
Pecos Archaeological Consultants
P.O. Box 1623
Carlsbad, New Mexico 88221

ABSTRACT

Four prehistoric and two historic sites have been recently identified on BLM lands located on the Carrizo Plain in eastern San Luis Obispo County. The prehistoric sites may represent remains of villages and special activity areas of the Early, Middle, and Late Prehistoric Periods. The historic sites include objects, features, and a structure relating to the ranching activities of the mid-to-late 19th Century.

INTRODUCTION

The Carrizo Plain is located in eastern San Luis Obispo County between the Caliente and the Temblor Mountains near the Kern County line. The Carrizo Plain is an internal drainage basin with all water draining into Soda Lake. During the summer the water evaporates and the lake becomes a white, salt-encrusted basin. The plain measures about 60 miles southeast-northwest by 10 miles northeast-southwest and is bordered on the north by the Temblor Mountains and on the south by the Caliente Mountains. Caliente Mountain, at 5106 feet, is the highest peak in San Luis Obispo County. The Temblors reach 4332 feet at McKittrick Summit. The Carrizo Plain lies at an elevation of 2100 to 2400 feet. The San Andreas Fault is visible along the northern edge of the plain. The plain, classified as a semi-arid grassland, is the largest remaining example of the San Joaquin Valley grasslands. The Carrizo Plain is one of the sunniest spots in California and summer temperatures can exceed 100° F. Winter night temperatures may dip below freezing, and while snow is rare it does occur.

Plant communities range from iodine bush and salt bush scrub to valley grasslands and California juniper woodland. Endangered animals living on the plain include the blunt-nosed leopard

lizard, the San Joaquin kit fox, the giant kangaroo rat, and the San Joaquin antelope ground squirrel. Tule Elk and pronghorn antelope have been reintroduced into the area and can be seen at various locations on the plain. Winter brings thousands of sandhill cranes to Soda Lake. Many raptors, including red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, kites, harriers, owls, and others, can be found all year throughout the area. Four reintroduced California condors have been recently sighted over Caliente Mountains. Domestic cattle are still being grazed on the grasslands.

Chumash, Yokut, and other Native Americans have lived, hunted, and traded in the area. Painted Rock is the best-known of the few recorded archaeological sites. Painted Rock has been described as one of the more significant example of Native American rock art in California. Euro-Americans first visited the plain sometime in the late 1700s or early 1800s. By the mid-1800s the plain was the center of vast cattle and sheep operations. In 1912, mechanized agriculture brought large-scale grain farming to feed cattle to the plain. Today, some 180,000 acres, about half of the Carrizo Plain, is jointly managed by the Bureau of Land Management, The Nature Conservancy, and the California Department of Fish and Game. Most of the bottomlands on the south half of the plain were recently purchased from private owners

and turned over to the BLM. The Carrizo is being managed for the benefit of rare and endangered plants and animals, and for the restoration of native ecosystems. Present day visitors come for educational and/or recreational purposes such as bird watching, photography, hiking, camping, visiting Painted Rock, hunting, etc.

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Johnson (1985:14) has ably summarized the previous archaeological research on the Carrizo Plain: "Virtually all of the attention focused on Painted Rock by archaeologists and other visitors over the past century has centered on the extensive and interesting pictographs which are present at the site." Such studies include the work done by Lee (1984), Lathrap (1950), and others. An excellent summary of the archaeological research may be found in the Johnson (1985) report to Oppenheimer Industries on the archaeological manifestations found in the vicinity of Painted Rock. To sum up, there have been less than a dozen inventory investigations which have not focused on the rock art of the Carrizo Plain. All of these reports are brief and unpublished.

PRESENT STUDIES

The present report is concerned with reporting the results of five small range-related or Bureau-driven projects which required cultural clearances. Preliminary data are given in this paper to simply report that some of the sites resemble large-scale villages of possibly seasonal habitation or even permanent year-long occupations.

THE SITES

Site locations and descriptions are given in very general terms so as to protect the sites and the information they contain. Future reports will give more complete descriptions of the sites.

These sites have not been described before.

Site 1

This site is located on a flat-topped ridge between two deep arroyos in the foothills of the Caliente Mountains. The site measures 150 m by 50 m in size. Deep middens, six concentrations of domestic artifacts each within a 6-8 m diameter area, one large 15-20 m diameter probable structural depression, and thousands of artifacts including lithics, shell, and bone characterize this site. The site is located above a very active spring and within ½ mile of a major rock art site. It is likely a small village locale.

Site 2

This site is located on the floor of a small valley in the foothills of the Caliente Mountains. Cultural materials extend for a distance of 750 m by 200 m between two arroyos. Artifacts are clustered in 10-15 m diameter areas. Over 20 such clusters are recorded. Each cluster contains artifacts which can only be described as domestic in nature. Milling stones, stone bowl fragments, raw lithic materials, flakes, shell, bone, charcoal, and finished tools are present at each of the recorded clusters. Active water seeps were present during the winter of 1993 in both bordering arroyos. Nearby areas have received some limited archaeological investigations during the 1960s and 1970s, but Site 2 was not recorded during the earlier studies. This site most likely is a large village. Two boulders with cupules are present at the south end of the site. Major rock art locales are within 1/2 mile of the site.

Site 3

This is a greatly disturbed site within a ranch compound. This site has been bulldozed, plowed, and cattle-disturbed over the past seventy years. Most of the site was moved by bulldozer to its present location in order to form an arroyo diversion embankment. Artifacts suggest prehistoric domestic activities and domiciles.

Site 4

This site is a long linear site measuring about 250 m by 15-25 m located along the edge of a

deep arroyo. Features include several clusters of fire-altered rocks, surface distributions of raw material nodules, worked cores, flake, and finished artifacts, and five clusters of domestic artifacts including stone bowls, milling artifacts, and shallow surface depressions. This site is located near several active springs and a reported rock art site. The rock art site was not previously known.

Site 5

This is a historic period site complex consisting of an extremely weathered "buggy", a road segment, a dam, and a melted adobe structure. Springs are present within a nearby arroyo. The site probably dates to the late 1870s-1880s based upon the buggy style and land ownership records. The road has not been recorded nor walked out from the buggy locale, but appears to head over the eastern foothills of Caliente Mountain to the Cuyama Valley.

Site 6

This site is a large historic period melted adobe structure of a ranch settled by the Abbott brothers in the late 1880s. The locale was abandoned and not reused by later ranchers.

Other Sites

Other sites visited, briefly observed, or reported to the author include a "Millingstone Horizon" or "Middle Period (Prehistoric)" cluster of three sites on the Elkhorn Plain, a lithic surface distribution of the late prehistoric period near a spring within the foothills of the Temblor Mountains, a new rock art site in association with two "probable" villages in the Caliente foothills, and a "Millingstone Horizon" site on the edges of the Caliente foothills above the Carrizo Plain. Also of note are the identification of two "keeled scrapers" from the eastern Elkhorn Plain, and a single "crescent" lithic artifact from a locale in the foothills of the Caliente Mountains.

which seem to represent villages and/or special-use areas of the early, middle, and late prehistoric period. Historic period sites relating to the ranching and agricultural activities of the 1870s and 1880s also are present.

Interested researchers can obtain additional information from the Caliente Resource Area Office in Bakersfield, California.

REFERENCES CITED

Johnson, John J.

1985 *An Archaeological Survey in the Vicinity of Painted Rock, Carrizo Plain, San Luis Obispo, California*. Office of Public Archaeology. Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Lathrap, Donald W.

1950 *A Distinctive Pictograph from Carrizo Plains, San Luis Obispo County*. Reports of the University of California Archaeological Survey No. 9. Berkeley.

Lee, Georgia

1984 *The Painted Rock Site (CA-SLO-79) of the Carrizo Plain*. Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

SUMMARY

Recent inventories on the Carrizo Plain Natural Area have indicated that there are locales