

Rock shelter find: rare prehistoric Indian art

By Morgan Simmons

Jamestown, Tennessee (AP) 1-09

Cory Holliday almost didn't see the stick figure painted on the sandstone. His first impression was that it was a clever fake.

A cave specialist for the Tennessee chapter of The Nature Conservancy, Holliday was searching for caves on a 4,200-acre tract in a remote part of Fentress County on the Cumberland Plateau. It was winter, and he heard water. Thinking there might be a cave nearby, he hiked down to the base of a bluff, where he discovered a rocky alcove bisected by a 10-foot waterfall.

On the roof of a nearby south-facing rock shelter was a foot-long painting of a dancing stick figure. The left leg appeared misshapen, and the right hand resembled a claw.

Sprouting from the head were swirly lines. To Holliday, they looked like antennae.

The Nature Conservancy had purchased the large, forested block near the East Fork of the Obey River for \$4.7 million in 2006, primarily because it is rich in caves and near two winter hibernating colonies of Indiana bats, a federally listed endangered species that remains in serious decline.

The rock shelter painting came as a complete surprise.

"I knew that Native American rock art had been found in the area, but I didn't realize this was so significant," Holliday said. "My first impression was that someone had drawn it with charcoal."

In fact, the artist most likely lived during the Mississippian Period between A.D. 1000 and 1600 and used a paint based on a prehistoric recipe whose main ingredient was pulverized clay.

That's according to Jan Simek, a University of Tennessee anthropology professor who specializes in cave archaeology.

Last spring, Simek, the acting UT chancellor, visited the rock shelter site. Using a scalpel, he chipped off a tiny sample of the pigment and brought it back to UT for a high-level chemical analysis.

The tests revealed no modern paint trace elements such as lead or zinc. What's more, Simek discovered that the reason the pictograph looks so fresh is because it's protected by a veneer of calcium carbonate leaching out of the sandstone.

"It is a remarkable figure," Simek said. "In my mind, there is no chance it is a recent fake."

{rawcontent 6}

For the last 15 years Simek has surveyed prehistoric rock art throughout the Southeast, and Tennessee in particular. During the early stages of his research, he documented the first known prehistoric cave art in North America in a cave between Knoxville and Chattanooga.

Since then, he and his research team have discovered prehistoric rock art inside 48 Tennessee caves. Additionally, they've discovered 38 open-air sites similar to the one recently identified on The Nature Conservancy's tract in Fentress County.

Simek said the rock shelter pictograph on The Nature Conservancy tract is highly unusual because the figure was drawn in black – a color usually associated with cave paintings as a symbol of death in the underworld.

Instead of black, virtually all known examples of open-air pictographs found in the Southeast are painted red, the color of life in the upper world, said Simek.

"If you take a physical step back and observe the Cumberland Plateau from the valley below, you see a massive rock wall," Simek said. "These people made pilgrimages to this place to worship and bury their dead. They decorated the landscape in a way that was clearly meaningful to them and on a scale that is unimaginable to us."

Tennessee has 9,200 known caves, more than any state in the U.S. With its sandstone cap rock and underlying limestone, the Cumberland Plateau is where most of the caves and rock shelters are concentrated.

Even by Cumberland Plateau standards, The Nature Conservancy's tract is notable for its extensive cave system. So far Holliday has explored 30 caves on the property, and he thinks that's just a fraction of what lies underground.

The waterfall near the rock shelter painting disappears almost as soon as it hits the ground.

And so it is with almost every stream system on the property, said Holliday.

"If you look at an aerial photograph of the property, the surface is dry," he said. "There are plenty of sandstone springs, but they all flow underground. It's a big tract with a lot of potential to step in a hole and never be seen again."

The Nature Conservancy's purchase of the 4,200-acre tract includes donations from Gov. Phil Bredesen's Tennessee Heritage Conservation Trust Fund and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Prior to the purchase, the land was slated

to be divided and developed.

The property will eventually be managed by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency for hunting and other forms of recreation.

Scientists rank the Cumberland Plateau as globally significant based on its plant and animal diversity. In 2007 The Nature Conservancy, the state of Tennessee and two timber companies partnered in a \$150 million land deal to protect 128,000 acres in the northern Cumberlands not far from the Indian rock art site.

Rob Bullard, protection manager for the Tennessee chapter of The Nature Conservancy, said that connecting these forest lands with existing public lands is the way to create wildlife corridors and large-scale natural sanctuaries.

“The size of this tract is significant because it ties into other tracts in the northern Cumberlands,” Bullard said. “When you start protecting large blocks of habitat, you start seeing results on an ecosystem scale.”

{rawcontent 4}

{rawcontent 14}