

Jeffers Petroglyphs

Rock, prairie and people define Jeffers Petroglyphs. We hope the information in this guide, our exhibits and our programs help you achieve a better understanding of this revered place.

People may have chosen to record images here because the rock faces south and is lit by the sun throughout the day. However, the carvings seem to disappear at midday. They are most visible at dawn and dusk when the angle of the sun casts deep shadows that seem to raise the images from the rock.

Jeffers Petroglyphs

27160 County Road 2, Comfrey
(three miles east of U.S. Hwy. 71 on Cottonwood Co. Rd. 10, one mile south on Co. Rd. 2.)

phone: 507-628-5591
www.mnhs.org

Jeffers Petroglyphs



The Visitor Center

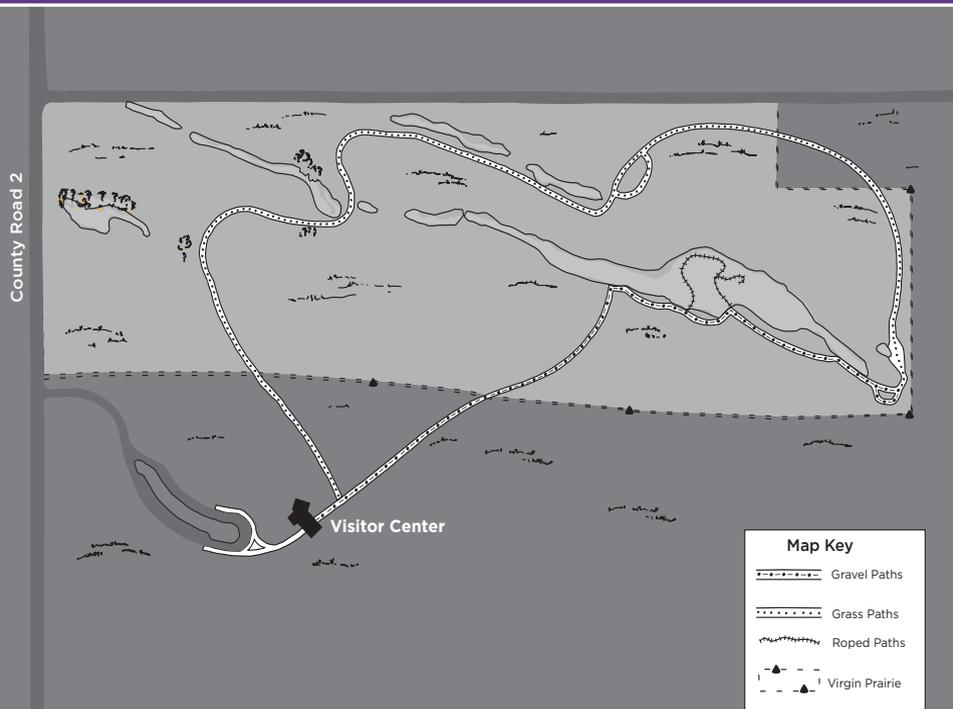
The visitor center offers a multi-media theater presentation and exhibits about American Indian culture and prairie ecology. Gift items and restrooms are provided for your convenience, and interpreters and hands-on activities can help you experience the natural and cultural landscape of the site.

Important Trail Information

We ask for your help in preserving the carvings and their fragile environment. The carvings are a cultural resource that can never be replaced, and it can take up to 500 years for a prairie to be restored naturally.

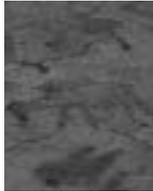
- Please do not touch the images, make tracings or otherwise disturb the rock surfaces.
- Please stay on the rope, gravel or mowed paths.
- Please do not pick the wildflowers or other plants.
- Please deposit all litter in the garbage cans provided.
- Please do not smoke on the trails.
- Please watch for poison ivy.

Thank you.



Rock

Viewed from the south, a pink rock face floating on a sea of green greets the eye. Fifty yards wide and 300 yards long, this rock emerges from native and recreated tallgrass prairie. The rock is part of a 23-mile ridge that extends across Cottonwood County. Called Red Rock Ridge, it is a series of quartzite outcroppings that intersects the southeastern edge



of what French explorers called the "Coteau des Prairies." The Coteau, meaning hill, extends from Rutland, N.D., to Jackson, Minn.

The Red Rock Ridge is about 250 yards wide and up to 50 feet higher than nearby fields.

The rock that is located at Jeffers is called Sioux quartzite; it is part of the quartzite deposit found near the western border of Minnesota at Pipestone National Monument. The quartzite at Jeffers is one of the oldest bedrock formations in Minnesota, deposited as sand more than 1.6 billion years ago. It is a metamorphic rock, meaning it was formed by enormous heat and pressure from deep in the earth. The outcropping was exposed by the wearing action of time. Its color varies from white to red to lavender-brown or reddish purple. All these colors are caused by an iron oxide film surrounding grains of quartz sand.

Part of the rock face appears to be covered with a thick coat of green, gray or black paint. This material is a living organism called lichen. Lichen consists of an alga that provides food through photosynthesis, and fungus with root-like structures that anchor it to the rock.

Around the world, certain landscapes and geological formations have special qualities that make them stand out from their surroundings. Many cultures feel such places have spiritual significance. To American Indians, rock formations emerging

from the earth provide a link between the physical and spiritual worlds. Such places are chosen to record visions, events, stories or maps.

Jeffers Petroglyphs is a special place, both for visitors and American Indians. To the contemporary American Indians who reside in and around the state, it is a very spiritual place — one where Grandmother Earth speaks of the past, present and future. Modern day descendants of those who left these markings continue to believe that this is indeed a place of worship, a prayer place no different than that of church, synagogue or mosque.

Based on nearby archaeological evidence, scholars believe that ancestors of American Indians first made rock carvings, or **petroglyphs**, on this outcropping about 5,000 years ago. Some of these carvings may have been created as recently as 250 years ago. Among the earliest carvings found here are images of buffaloes and atlatis, or throwing sticks. Atlatis and darts were used to hunt buffaloes

before the bow and arrow were developed 1,200 years ago. These symbols, along with other images

carved on the rock, such as thunderbirds and turtles, remain important in American Indian culture.

The carvings of deer, buffaloes, turtles, thunderbirds and humans are more than art or mimicry of the natural environment. They are powerful cultural symbols of the complex communities that inhabited the prairies of southwestern Minnesota and still thrive today.



Prairie

Minnesota is at the northeastern edge of a tallgrass prairie that once covered 400,000 square miles of



North America. Today, less than one percent of that prairie remains. Of the 80 acres at Jeffers Petroglyphs, 33 are native prairie and 47 contain one of the first prairie recreations in Minnesota. Like all prairies, this landscape is a mixture of flowers and grasses.

More than 100 species of prairie plants are found here, some of which are very rare. A federally threatened species, prairie bush clover, thrives at Jeffers Petroglyphs.

This grassland is unique in other ways. Prairies are classified as wet, mesic or dry. Because of the rock formation, all three types are found at Jeffers Petroglyphs. Wet prairies have considerable water in the soil, dry prairies have little moisture, and the amount of moisture in mesic prairies falls between the other two. Near the rock outcropping, the soil is shallow and dries out quickly, creating an environment perfect for plants adapted to the drier plains of the American West. Here you will find prickly pear cactus, buffalo grass and little bluestem. Because the rock face sheds water and concentrates it into a single area, a wet prairie environment dominated by cordgrass and sedge is also present. However, the prairie at Jeffers is primarily a mesic prairie, ruled by big bluestem and Indian grass that grows up to eight feet high.

The prairies in this region developed during a warm and dry period 9,000 years ago, a few thousand years after the last glaciers receded from the area. Prairie grasses and flowers adapt to these conditions by forming extensive underground root systems. With this adaptation, the prairie was able to survive fires, which were sometimes started on

purpose by people to draw buffaloes to the renewed, richer, shorter, tender grass that follows a fire. During wet years, these fires kept water-hungry trees from taking over the grasslands.

Although the diet of American Indians consisted of a variety of plants, fish, insects, reptiles and mammals, buffaloes provided the essential dietary and raw materials needed to survive. They supplied food, clothing, bedding, shelter, fuel, tools, weapons, household utensils, personal or ceremonial adornment, and symbols of worship.

One buffalo provided hundreds of pounds of meat. Its tough, impermeable skin was ideal for making the mobile tipi, capes and bedding, rope, shields, boats, meat bags, pipe holders and parchment for painted records. Tools were made from bone. Thread was made from sinew. Cups were made from the horn. The stomach was used as a container for water and, when propped upright with



four sticks, it became a pot for cooking with heated stones. The bladder was used as a water container and as a bag to store food. Buffaloes were grocery stores, hardware stores and clothing stores for the people on the prairie.

In addition to providing direct sustenance for the buffaloes, the prairie offered American Indians foods such as prairie turnips, grass seeds and rose hips, the same foods eaten by early settlers of the 19th century. In the 20th century, prairies produced hay to fatten cattle, milkweed pods for food during the droughts of the 1930s, and milkweed seeds to fill life preservers during World War II.

People

For thousands of years, American Indians traveled with buffalo herds, collected plant foods as they ripened, and fished in the rivers and lakes. In time, they lived in hide-covered houses when following the herds of buffaloes, and in sturdy bark-and-post structures in their summer planting villages.

Although we don't know which cultural group of American Indians made the earliest carvings thousands of years ago, we do know from historical records which groups inhabited this area during the last 350 years. This region was home to loway and Otoe tribes until around 1650. Cheyenne were here until about 1750, when the Dakota began to live in this area. Today, the Dakota live in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana and Canada. They, along with the loway, Cheyenne and Ojibwe, are helping the Minnesota Historical Society and its visitors understand this sacred place.

In the mid-19th century, European and American settlers arrived, and their farming altered the landscape. Along the northern border of the site is a wagon trail created in the first years of settlement. The settlers plowed the prairie, and introduced exotic plants from Europe, Asia and Africa. The native prairie that surrounds the rock face survived because the soil was too shallow to plow. On the horizon you see the fields, houses, barns and grain silos of contemporary farmers.

In the 1960s, local residents recognized the cultural and environmental value of the site. They cleaned it of fieldstones and refuse, identified and recorded the carvings and plant life, and urged the Minnesota Historical Society to acquire the site. In 1966, the



Society purchased the site with the hope of providing knowledge of and appreciation for the history of the rock carvings, the environment in which they are found, and the people who made them.

The Trails

A rich natural and cultural history is found along a 1.2-mile trail in 80 acres of prairie. Signs guide

visitors on trails through both short and tall grass prairies teeming with cactus, blossoming flowers and rare plants, songbirds, burrows of



pocket gophers and other wildlife. A roped trail that crosses the rock face allows visitors to view the carvings without walking on them. The trail from the visitor center to the end of the rock face is .4 of a mile, and it continues another .8 of a mile through the prairie before returning to the visitor center.

Almost two billion years of history are recorded on the rocks at Jeffers Petroglyphs. Visitors will see fossilized sand ripples and mudflats that turned to pink quartzite 1.6 billion years ago and deep scars left by a mile-thick glacier as it scraped the rock outcropping on its way south 14,000 years ago. The buffaloes, too, have left their marks on the rock. By rubbing against the rock's edges to shed dense winter hair, the buffaloes may have polished its surface. Beginning 5,000 years ago, ancestors of American Indians began carving symbols in the rock, until finally, from 1875 to 1968, settlers and their descendants added their names.

Americans Indians continue to hold this place sacred and continue to conduct religious prayers and ceremonies here as their ancestors did thousands of years ago. Please respect this place in the same manner that you respect your own place of worship.