

FIELD WALKING IN BINBROOK, ONTARIO, CANADA.

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Field survey is not the most exciting thing to do in archaeology. It's often hot or muddy or exhausting or all of the above. Sometimes you walk for eight hours and find absolutely nothing. Sometimes you find really cool things.

Today, we took a break from our excavation of a large lithic site to check out a field.

Fieldwalking in archaeology is pretty much exactly how it sounds. You get assigned a field, you drive over to it and walk a lot. The field has usually been ploughed a few weeks before and we wait for a few good rains to settle the dust. Canada does not have a significant period of architectural development, so the vast majority of our archaeology can be found less a metre below the surface. Ploughing brings artifacts up to the surface and rain washes away excess dirt, leaving them ready for us to find.



Walking along, looking for cool stuff.

We do it systematically. Standing five metres apart from each other, we walk in straight lines in a grid pattern, staring at the ground in front of us. Most of us have been doing this for so many years that artifacts seem to leap up from the ground and we spot them as easily as if they were glowing pink. When we find something culturally modified (a flake, an arrowhead, etc), we put a bright orange flag next to it.



Walking, looking at the dirt in front of me.

When we find something, we reduce our survey to a smaller scale. Instead of being five metres apart, we stand shoulder to shoulder and walk more slowly, doing an intensive survey of the area for roughly 15m square. If we find more artifacts, we flag them as well and expand our area until we have a significant buffer zone of no artifacts. If we find enough artifacts and place enough flags, it is declared a site. And thus, most of the archaeological sites in Canada are found.

We did well today. Our site was a field within a sod farm. The sod had been harvested a while back and the land had been ploughed for us. We had a few decent rain storms over the past few days, so the weathering was decent. We started out and almost immediately found a few flakes. Intensive survey didn't reveal much else, so they were declared to be "IF's" (Isolated Finds) and we moved on.



First flake of the day!

It was pouring when we got up in the morning but by the time we actually started working, it was nice outside. We've been having a really hot and dry summer so far, so the cool breeze and overcast sky was appreciated. And since it was a sod farm, the land was mercifully flat. Sometimes, we have to survey giant hills with badly ploughed fields, where each step is both exhausting and dangerous, not knowing where your feet will land. This was a walk in the park in comparison.

Around 11am, we found our first arrowhead. Not the prettiest specimen ever made, but hey, it made us happy. Looking around the point revealed tons of other lithics and we declared our first site. Half an hour later, we found a decent biface and some more flakes, leading to our second site.



Arrowhead.



Yay, biface.



Yep, this is what an archaeological site looks like in Canada before excavation.

After lunch, we finished walking the property with time to spare. We finish up the intensive survey and start cataloguing our finds. Each IF is noted on a map. Each “diagnostic” (an artifact, usually a tool, that can be used for dating methods) is automatically recorded as a site, regardless of whether we find much much else around it. Anything with seven or more finds on the surface is also declared a site. We record what we find, where we found it and we get a GPS reading of the location on the property. When the time comes for us to return to dig it all up, we’ll look over it again and map out the exact location of all the finds before we start digging.



Steve collects all the lithics.

After the day's work, we come out with two sites that will require further excavation, two tools and tons of isolated finds. And, best of all, we finish an hour early on the Friday of a long weekend and we head home happy.