

SURVEYING THE SOUTHERN HIGH PLAINS

July 29, 2017 John Lowe Day of Archaeology 2017, Explore Posts, Fieldwork, Jobs, Survey

This is my 6th time posting on the Day of Archaeology, and as with every other time, I'm not in the field. It's going to be 104 degrees (40 c) in Austin today, can you blame me for wanting to be indoors? So, I'll regale you with tales and photos from a survey I did in the Southern High Plains of the US, specifically [Cochran, Co. Texas](#).



The High Plains is (very) flat grassy prairie with few trees.

In my 13 years of working as an archaeologist in Texas, I had only done a couple of days of work in the Texas Panhandle. That was one reason I was excited to do this project. I was also excited about the potential for [megafauna](#) and Paleoindian sites! Heck, I wasn't all that far from the [Clovis](#) site (aka Blackwater Draw Locality 1), or [Lubbock Lake](#)! Sure, the area is very dry now, but all the draws were wet at the end of the Pleistocene, and [playa lakes](#) were (and are) waterholes for beast and human alike. I have visions of coming across something like the famous [Folsom point embedded in bison ribs](#).

This area has seen little professional/scientific archaeology work (although I'm sure private collections abound), and there are only two recorded sites for the area (one recorded just a couple years back by my predecessor). The 250+ acres I was to survey would be the first large-scale area archaeology project in the county. I was also going to survey for a new entrance road that crossed a draw! Plus, the projects

were to remove invasive vegetation and restore the area to the typical plains prairie setting prior to the introduction of Western livestock and the plow, which in turn would enhance the area as habitat for several species of bird, including the not-quite-threatened [Lesser Prairie Chicken](#). One of the best parts of my job is that so much of my work relates to habitat enhancement and restoration.

As it happens, there were no fluted points to be found, no mammoth tusks, no pit houses, no Southwestern pottery sherds. I spent days walking back and forth across the slightly rolling prairie, digging a hole very so often, with very little variation in the soil. Without my Trimble GPS, transects would have been very hard, as you can see for miles and miles into the distance without a single thing to sight on! The relative monotony of my days could have been relaxing in some ways, very peaceful and quiet in the high country with no one within 2-3 miles. It would have been near perfect, but for one thing...



This snake is coiled to strike! (note: photo is extremely zoomed)

There were snakes. Big rattlesnakes. Well camouflaged in the grass, hiding under sotol, unnoticed until they made their presence felt with a blood-chilling rattle. For all the peace and quiet, it was hard to relax. I had to watch every step, keep my eyes and ears alert, have my shovel ready. Of course I was wearing snake guards, but these guys were big, and scary. Of the 6 days I surveyed, I encountered rattlers on 4 of them. One stretch of slightly lower ground became informally known as Snek Alley in my mind.

It wasn't a total wash (pun intended). I did find a site:



Look, a site! See the rocks?

It was little, but it was a site. It had a scatter of possible burned rock (a mudstone of some sort), a broken biface, and a few pieces of debitage. This area is poor in chippable lithic raw material, so the debitage told a story of travel or interaction. Several of the pieces were chert similar to that found on the [Edwards Plateau](#), the nearest portion of which was well over 150 miles to the southeast. One piece was [Alibates agate/flint](#), a well-known lithic type originating from a source in the northern Texas panhandle, over 150 miles to the northeast.

I worked long, hard days and walked a lot of miles. I felt quite happy when I was done.



Field selfie with thumbs up for a job well done! I'm a High Plains Drifter!

So that was a very short summary of my trip up into the Southern High Plains. And I'll be back, as there are a couple thousand more acres slated for habitat enhancement! But next time, I'm hoping to work while the snakes are still hibernating!

And now, cheers to the Day of Archaeology and the staff as they ride off into the sunset...



The High Plains are good for spectacular sunsets (and sunrises, since I worked very early!)