

# A Turtle Geoglyph in Central Montana

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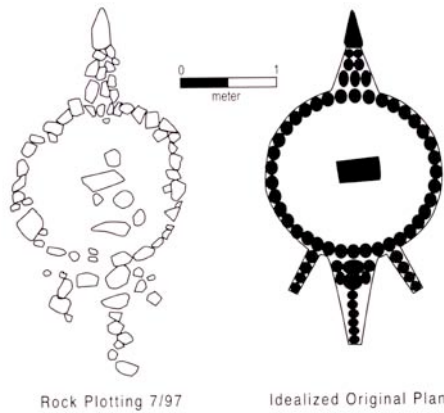


The turtle is portrayed in different media on the plains, and in Montana the turtle motif occurs as pictographs, petroglyphs, and in one case as a large geoglyph. Our focus is on how the turtle geoglyph compares with turtles in Montana rock art and how different attitudes about the turtle in Plains cultures relate to the effigy figure.

The geoglyph (24ME15) was first recorded in 1974 by two women, who never saw the turtle but were told about it by a retired SCS employee. We first visited the site in 1976 and again in 1979. No photos were filed with the original single page recording, and the only record of our early visits is a single color instamatic print taken in 1976. In 1997 we returned to the site for a more detailed recording.



The turtle is made of locally available limestone rocks. It measures 3.6 meters long from the top of its head (a single rock), on the right of the 1997 photo to the left, to the end of its tail, on the left in the 1997 photo, which extends out beyond two back legs. There are no front legs, and there may never have been any. The



widest point is the circular body, which is 1.7 meters across. Six rocks are in the center of the body. The wide neck and wide pointed tail suggests this may represent a snapping turtle. Many of the rocks forming the turtle are sodded in, and there is no evidence of recent vandalism or change in the figure between 1997 (photo on page 1) and 1976 (following photo) even though the site is in an area that is currently used as a cattle pasture and has been for several decades.



A rock cairn (photo to left) is on the limestone outcropping forming the highest point on the ridge, about 40 feet south of the turtle. The pile is a meter and a half in diameter and made of the locally available limestone rocks. It is the only nearby feature; no artifacts have been reported from the area.

The turtle is in the Castle Mountains of central Montana on the Lewis and Clark National Forest. The site is on a flat grassy area in a slight saddle area on the edge of a high mountain meadow. The Castle Mountains are an island-in-the-plains formation dominated by limestone with many caves and rockshelters, several of which contain rock art.





Rock art sites close to the geoglyph include Circle Cave, which contains a single red circle. It is at the base of the first limestone reef below the saddle with the turtle.



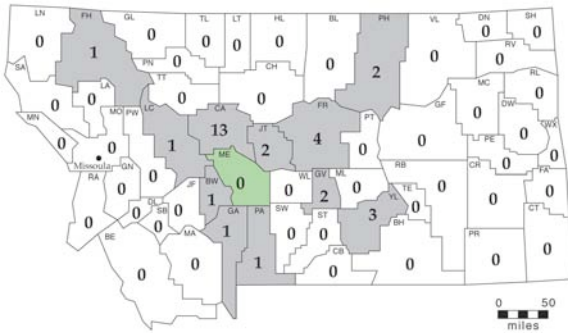
A more extensive rock art site is at the base of the steep mountain slope below both Circle Cave and the turtle effigy. This site is on a large limestone block that lies in a creek bed. Although in an area of several pictograph sites, there have been no turtles recorded in the paintings of the Castle Mountains to date.

The turtle effigy alignment is one of only two geoglyphs currently recorded in the state files. The other is a human representation, which has been the subject of publications since the 1950s. Tom and Alice Kehoe suggested in a 1959 article that it was associated with the Blackfeet and represents Napi, a supernatural figure, who played an important role in the creation of the world. Carling Malouf continued this line of thought in his mention of the figure in a 1975 article, and when the figure is discussed in reports by Ken and Sherri Deaver in 1984 and by David Schwab and Mark Baumler in 1991 they continue to mention the possible Blackfoot connection but do not offer new or additional justification for this association beyond citing the Kehoes. This figure



is located about a hundred miles south of the turtle effigy and is currently on a ranch owned by Ted Turner. Another human geoglyph, which is said to be another Napi

figure, is reported to be along the Rocky Mountain front west of Great Falls, but it has not yet been recorded. Another is reported to be in the northeastern part of the state. The association between these geoglyphs and between the humans and the turtle is unknown at this time but will be the subject of future research.



Currently in the over 700 rock art sites recorded in Montana, only 15 have turtle representations reported on the site forms, and the counties with these sites are marked in gray on this map. The turtle geoglyph is in the green county. The 15 sites contain a total of 31 turtles. However,

most of these sites have only one turtle each, with two sites reporting two turtles, and one site reporting four, while the county with the most turtles, 13, has 12 in one high cave overlooking the Smith River in central Montana. All of the 31 turtles except three are painted. One petroglyph turtle is on a boulder in the northeastern part of the state, and the other two petroglyph turtles are on the sandstone cliff at Ryegate east of the geoglyph. The distribution of the pictograph and petroglyph turtles relative to the geoglyph, indicates that the effigy lies in the center of the rock art turtle area of Montana, although it is in a county with no recorded rock art turtles.

An examination of the rock art turtles indicates that most in the state are small, and the painted forms are of three general kinds. There are solid painted turtles, outlined-bodied turtles, and outlined-bodies with interior lines or dots.

The solid turtle, in the photo to the right, is west of the effigy in the Big Belt Mountains. It is



in a small rockshelter overlooking the Missouri River valley.



Another solid red turtle (in photo to the left) is in a cave along the Middle Fork Judith River, north of the effigy. It appears to be upside down, with long legs.



Another solid red turtle (in photo to the right) is at the Boulder River Indian Cave, which is south of the effigy in a limestone cavern high on the mountain side. This turtle is on a panel with an unusual human holding a circular net-shield and a bison with spears.

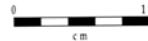


Northwest of the geoglyph in Cascade County, there are 12 turtles in Dillinger Cave, along the Smith River. These turtles are all alike (in photo to left). They are all small, have oval outlined bodies divided into four generally equal parts by two crossing lines, with four short legs, and a short tail.

The single turtle in Twin Caves, also in Cascade County and along the same drainage, is much larger and made of orange paint with two lines dividing its oval body, giving it a three part division (photo to right). However, its legs and tail are nothing like the turtles in Dillinger Cave, as can be seen in the drawings of the turtles below.



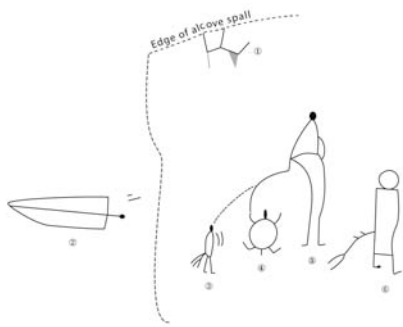
Twin Caves  
24CA101



Dillinger Cave  
24CA346

Pictograph Cave south of Billings has a black outlined turtle with a pie-like design. No other site in the state, to date, has reported a black turtle. The other turtle in this cave has a red outlined body.

Four turtles in Fergus County, northeast of the geoglyph, are all at one site (24FR3), but all are just slightly different from one another. One turtle at this site is solid red while the other three all have solid red heads and tails, but their oval-shaped bodies are filled with dots. The two smaller turtles with dots have straight lines representing legs and feet, while the larger bodied figure with dots have three pronged toes at the ends of each of his four feet, much like the Twin Caves turtle.



Big Cave (24JT244). Field sketch of pictograph panel on back wall (Greer 7/94). Figure numbers correspond to site form description numbers.

Two turtles are attached to other figures by lines. In Judith Basin County, at Big Cave (24JT244) shown in the drawing to the left, a turtle, has an open oval body with no interior design, single line legs, and a tail connected by a line to a tall anthropomorph on the right. The turtle at North Stickney Painted Rock (24LC1147), in the photo to the left, is a similar open oval turtle with single line legs and a tail connected to another figure. However, in this case the attached figure is pregnant. The association of turtles with fertility is not uncommon among Plains groups, but this panel is the only one in the state where this connection is clearly portrayed.



Because other ground-level rock alignments are associated with the solstice, the orientation of the turtle geoglyph was measured. The head points toward the mountain across the canyon and is oriented 75 degrees true north or 89 degrees magnetic. The photo to the right shows that view. The tail points directly in the







opposite direction toward the adjacent grassy mountain parkland, as shown in the photo the left. However, in both directions rising mountains prevent direct views of the rising or setting sun suggesting this geoglyph was not constructed for solstice purposes.

In the early 1990s, Sherri Deaver discussed the turtle geoglyph with a Blackfoot cultural representative during an ethnographic overview of the Castle Mountains. She was told the Blackfeet felt it represented a burial or ceremonial area, and the site was considered sacred by the tribe. There was no mention as to whether or not the Blackfoot cultural representative believed the geoglyph represented a

turtle, which would have been interesting considering the turtle is portrayed as a murderer in some Blackfoot stories, and Grinnell reported the Blackfeet considered the turtle generally to be bad. If this geoglyph was associated with a burial, it is doubtful that the burial was one in which the body was placed in the earth. The ground here is hard with almost no deposition. However, a body could have been left in a nearby tree, placed under a cairn, or in a nearby limestone cave, rockshelter, or niche.



The turtle was instrumental in the creation of the world according to several tribes including the Gros Ventres, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota. The Arapaho were also known to seek the turtle as a guardian spirit or supernatural helper during visions, and the Hidatsa considered it sacred and associated it with the buffalo. However, we know of no reports of historically known tribes in Montana constructing turtle geoglyphs. In her ethnographic overview Sherri Deaver identifies animals with known traditional cultural uses in the Castle Mountains, and of the 100 listed, the turtle is not included for this area. Although turtle geoglyphs occur in the eastern part of the Northern Plains, particularly Saskatchewan, this appears to be the westernmost expression of this site type reported to date.

Geoglyphs are uncommon in Montana, and there is currently no definite information on their age, function, or cultural affiliation. The turtle geoglyph form does not compare closely enough with any of the Montana rock art turtles for any direct relation to be assumed between any of the sites. Considering the durability of the feature during the past 25 years when it has been in an active cattle pasture, there is no reason to think it could not have endured for hundreds of years. Therefore, there is no justification for assuming it was constructed by a historically known tribe in the area, and it could date at least as early as the beginning of the Late Prehistoric period, a time to which some of the rock art turtles in the state have been dated. However, at this time, we must conclude that we have no definitive statements to offer about why the turtle was constructed, who made it, or when. However, we have just begun to research this topic and plan to continue our study in pursuit of this information.