

Past to Present: American Indian Life in the Arkansas Headwaters

A Timeless Landscape

As you travel through the Arkansas headwaters, imagine a landscape teeming with grazing bison, the sun glistening off snow-filled mountain cirques, their melt waters filling creeks draining into the Arkansas River. On the slopes above the river, smoke drifts from vent holes on top of hide-covered brush structures, the temporary homes of the valley's American Indian residents. Children laugh and run, while the adults fashion stone tipped projectiles, and prepare meat and hides for the months ahead.



This artist's rendering of a bison kill depicts what would have been a common scene for people who once occupied this area. (Illustration by Greg Harlin, courtesy of the State Historical Society of North Dakota.)

Learning About the Past

This would have been a typical scene in the Arkansas headwaters at any point from about 11,500 years ago to as recently as 150 years ago. Hundreds of American Indian archaeological sites have been documented in the area. Archaeologists can interpret much about life in the past by studying these sites and the artifacts associated with them.

The Upper Arkansas River Valley was much more than just a travel corridor. The area was rich with resources that people needed to survive, and could even have allowed for year-round occupation of the valley. Archaeological sites on Cottonwood Pass also show that people ventured into the mountains to hunt and gather resources as early as 10,000 years ago.

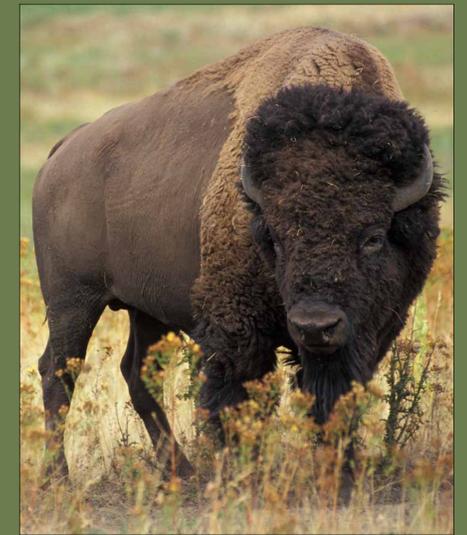


Projectile points similar to the ones pictured above have been found across the Upper Arkansas River Valley and date to about 11,500 years ago. (Image courtesy of Todd Surovell, University of Wyoming.)

Bountiful Resources

The Upper Arkansas River Valley is an area rich with resources where people would have found many edible plant species available to harvest from the valley bottom to the mountain tops. This includes berries and various weedy annual plants, such as lambsquarter (*Chenopodium*), a relative of quinoa. Hunters would have preyed on abundant bison and other

large mammals in the valley. A type of rock ideal for making stone tools outcrops near Trout Creek Pass. Here, ancient mining pits can still be seen, documenting the tremendous effort people expended to obtain this stone. Tools made from this material are found all over the valley, and even further north in South Park and along the Front Range.



This piece of chert from quarries near Trout Creek Pass (left), along with subsistence resources such as lambsquarter (middle), and bison (right) were some of the many reasons hunter-gatherers would visit and spend time in the Arkansas headwaters area. Bison would have been abundant throughout the valley from the first arrival of humans nearly 11,500 years ago until the mid-1800s.



Archaeologists, like those pictured here, have documented hundreds of archaeological sites in the Upper Arkansas River Valley. Using these data, archaeologists can piece together a picture of what life was like for the people who once lived in this area.

American Indians Today

A combination of oral history, archaeological data, and historical records document Ute bands traveling from Indian agencies in the San Luis Valley to their traditional hunting grounds on the Great Plains in the 1800s. Many of those people likely passed this spot on their journey. While the arrival of American explorers and settlers greatly impacted Indigenous people, Native groups still live across Colorado today, including the Southern Ute

and Ute Mountain Ute tribes who both have reservations in southern Colorado. Nearly 50 tribes with ancestral ties to Colorado regularly consult with archaeologists, federal and state agencies, and other groups regarding modern day impacts to their ancestral lands. The insight American Indians provide during these consultations is vital in giving a voice back to the people that have called this area home for thousands of years.



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