

# Blackfoot Cave

## & The Natural History of the Palmer Divide

It is impossible to understand the cultural history of the past 6000 years in Colorado without also thinking about the human-environment relationship. Climate and the natural world were just as much factors in the lives of American Indian hunter-gatherers 2000 years ago as they were in the lives of settlers and farmers in the early 1900s. People adapt to changing environmental conditions and to changes in the abundance of vital resources like food and water.

Knowing where reliable resources can be found, even during lean times, is crucial for successful adaptation. The spring at Blackfoot Cave likely continued to flow, even when conditions elsewhere were dry. Plant remains recovered from the site, such as prickly pear cactus, indicate use of foods that would have been available during drier times. Reliable water and food sources made Blackfoot Cave an ideal camping spot.



Evolving from their much larger ancestors after the last ice age, modern bison (*Bison bison*) first appeared on the Great Plains around 3800 B.C. Bison thrived on the Great Plains and were a primary source of food for people living in the region, including at Blackfoot Cave. During drier times, bison populations would have migrated to areas with better water and forage like the Palmer Divide.



Drought was not uncommon in the distant past. In eastern Colorado, an especially severe drought began about 300 B.C. Places like Blackfoot Cave, with a reliable source of water and drought tolerant edible plants, would have been more inviting than the much drier Plains. Another major drought hit the region between 250 and 500 A.D., which was a period of intensive occupation at Blackfoot Cave.



Conditions improved after 500 A.D. and the number of people living on the Palmer Divide and in the Denver Basin increased. Then, between about 1475 and 1850 A.D., a period known as the Little Ice Age brought much cooler and wetter conditions to the Palmer Divide and the region. These cooler conditions may be one reason that there is little evidence of occupation at Blackfoot Cave during this period.



The Dust Bowl, from 1934 until the 1940s, was among the most dramatic examples of a changing environment. A combination of extremely dry conditions and intensive agricultural practices led to a catastrophic loss of vegetation and topsoil across the Great Plains. Ranches like the one at Blackfoot Cave almost certainly were effected, although perhaps not as severely as farms further east on the Great Plains.

### Timeline of Major Blackfoot Cave Occupations

The colored bars on the timeline represent the three major cultural occupations at the site. How might these occupations have been shaped by the natural history of the Palmer Divide?

